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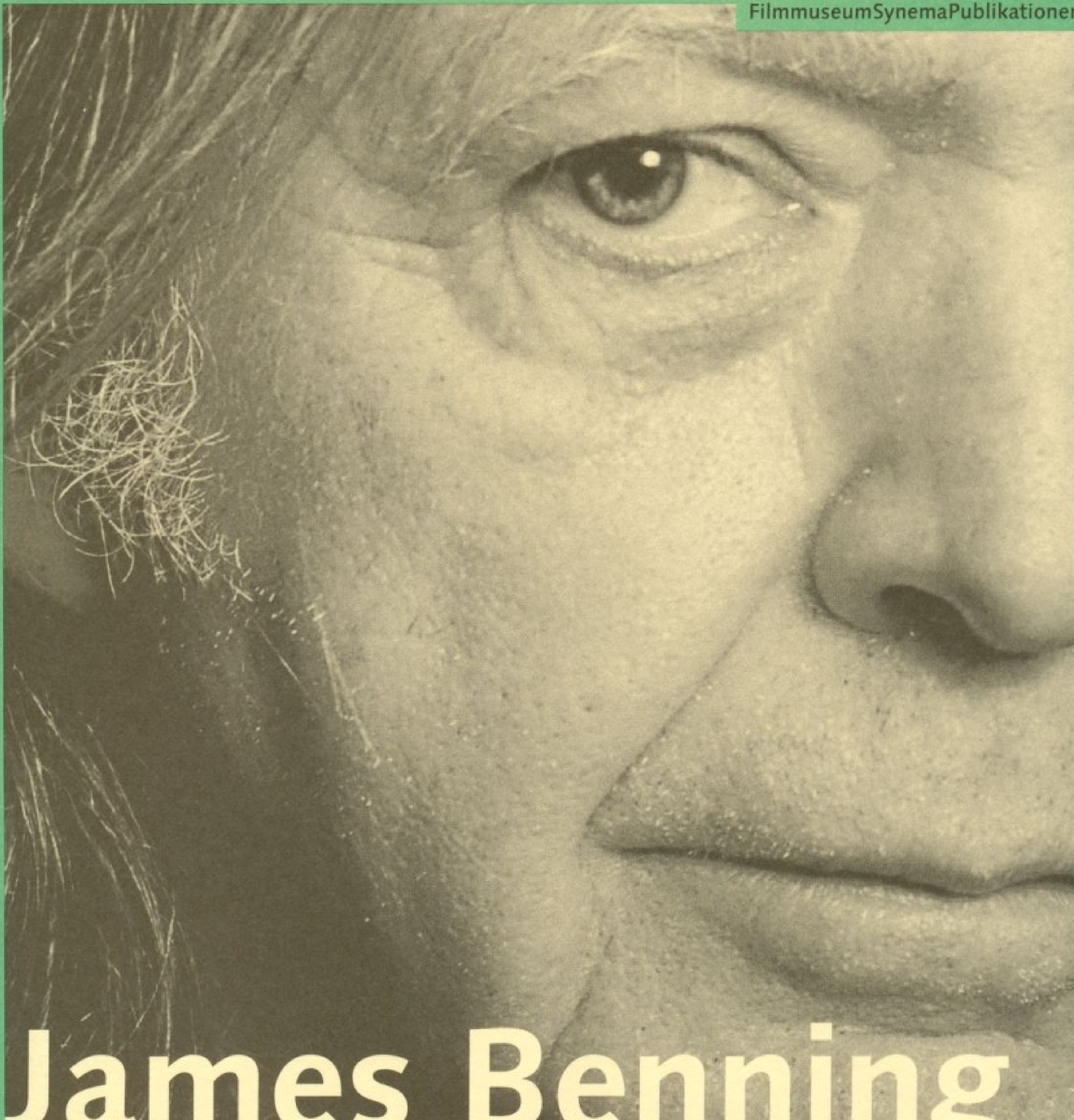

James Benning

Barbara Pichler, Claudia Slanar (Eds.)

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Preface

For more than three decades, James Benning has been making films that defy categorization while generating a body of work that deeply informs the landscape of American Independent Cinema and beyond. A solitary filmmaker who usually works on his own, he has produced 34 films since 1971 (not including 3 lost shorts), shooting and distributing exclusively on 16mm film, a medium close to extinction at this point in history. Seen as a whole, the body of Benning's work reveals an astonishing range and depth. While his aesthetic interests tap into major developments of the American avant-garde including structural film and the new narrative movement, he is an innovator who has developed a unique language that also speaks outside of these traditions. His films are truly idiosyncratic and do not follow conventional narrative patterns. They 'look and listen', focusing on the construction of the image, the direction of the gaze, the economy of attention to visual and aural events. At the same time, the viewer is presented with a cinematic experience that celebrates the beauty and tangles with the complexity of Benning's world, a profoundly unique envisioning of the United States of America.

Benning creates a vernacular iconography that transcends the need for a traditional plot. Every one of his signature long shots narrates a story, speaking to the natural beauty and great promise of the US, the destruction of the countryside through ecological and economical developments, US politics in the 19th and 20th century and the American way of life as shaped by consumerism, industrialization and the media. Looking at his complete œuvre, Benning emerges not only as an artist who has developed a very specific aesthetic language, but also as a political person and an ingenious story-teller. Although his films consciously avoid the trappings of generalization and polemical, socio-political activism, they articulate a strong personal statement in regard to the American dream and its nightmarish underbelly.

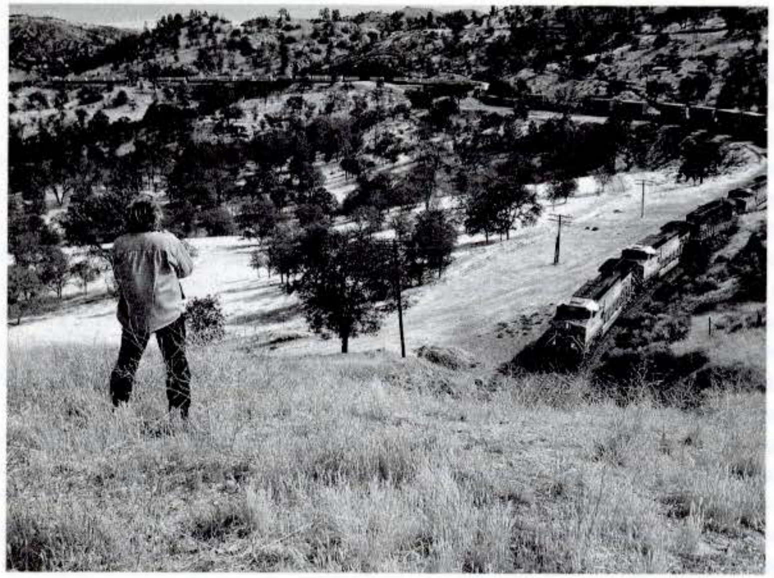
Benning's work has been screened at festivals for many years. The films he has produced as of the early 1990s define him as a "master framer of landscape" (Jonathan Rosenbaum)—they have magnetized an ever-growing fan base, particularly in Europe and especially in Vienna, Austria. The fact remains that his earlier films are rarely seen and largely unknown to contemporary audiences. This book represents the first complete monograph dedicated to James Benning. It considers his entire œuvre, providing a complete account of his development as a filmmaker up to 2007. As 'place' is so important to Benning's art, the book also chronicles his many journeys through the United States, from his time in the Midwest to his 'New York period', to the epic works produced in the American West. Our essays follow the chronology of Benning's filmic production and offer close readings of certain films in particular phases of his career. They are meant to provide a background for the individual perspectives of our guest authors who constitute a wide array of artists, critics, and scholars. Finally, James Benning himself has made an invaluable contribution in the form of an essay and a biographical timeline.

The overall design of the book is inspired by Benning's concept of his work as a 'spherical space', connecting places, political and personal events, images, sounds and text. This notion challenges a closed and hegemonic representation of history and contemporary life. *James Benning* represents a multi-faceted approach to Benning's work, in the form of essays, illustrations, and a detailed appendix which offers a complete filmography, a list of screenings, a biography and a selected bibliography, information previously not easily available.

We would like to express our gratitude to all the authors who have contributed to this book, as well as to Gabi Adebisi-Schuster, whose elaborate visual design is essential to the overall concept of the book. Eve Heller, the main translator and copy editor of the book, and the additional translators have been indispensable, maintaining the individual style and tone of the authors. We would like to thank the Austrian Film Museum, Alexander Horwath and his team, and especially Michael Loebenstein, publication manager and copy editor. The publication of *James Benning* coincides with a complete retrospective launched by the Austrian Film Museum in November of 2007, an historical occasion without precedent. Finally, thanks to SYNEMA and all those individuals who have provided our project with crucial encouragement and support for the past two years.

Last but not least, we would like to thank James Benning. His generosity made it all possible.

Barbara Pichler & Claudia Slanar



James Benning, location scouting for *RR* (in 2004)

Claudia Slanar

Taking Position

did you ever hear that cricket sound? *(1971) to* 3 minutes on the dangers of film recording *(1975)*

When James Benning begins to make films in the early 1970s, the structural film movement has just passed its peak. A canon of works and filmmakers is established, at the latest, with the publication of P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* (1974): structural film has been taken up by the academy and a phase of institutionalization has begun during the course of which interests and tendencies take various directions that won't be re-defined till the end of the decade.

Sitney stipulates three loosely related tendencies in avant-garde film of the 1970s: image-text/language relationships as the continuation of themes and motifs of the structural film; a coinciding interest in autobiographical themes; and a reduction to terms of image likewise structural in nature.[1] Paul Arthur agrees with Sitney and retrospectively describes two conflicting directions that attempt to stake out their territory at the time: on the one hand, the structural film fighting for preeminence and on the other, the New Narrative Movement[2] dedicated to a re-politicizing of the image as well as to restoring the long proscribed tradition of narrative itself, albeit in a deconstructed form.

It is exactly these influences that can be seen in Benning's early works. His interest in composition and structure as well as narrative modes initially leads to widely varying results, until he is ultimately able to connect them in a highly independent form towards the end of this early phase of his work.

Early Narratives

But let's start at the beginning with James Benning in his late 20s. He has just completed a graduate degree in mathematics. His first efforts using an 8mm Bolex camera are influenced by painting and drawing, the camera functions "as a paint brush,"[3] to record his immediate environment. After various reasons force him to quit his job as a math teacher at a college in Upstate New York, he buys a 16mm Bolex camera. He decides to return to the University of Wisconsin at Madison and commences with an

1) P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film. The American Avant-Garde 1943–2000*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 371.

2) Paul Arthur characterizes the formal tendencies of the movement as follows: shots are concerned with terms of depth and surface kindred to iconic standards and invested with story and characters. The avant-garde eventually integrates documentary forms and conventions connected to autobiographical genres such as New Reportage or the travelogue. See his "The Last of the Last Machine? Avant-Garde Film Since 1966," *Millenium Film Journal*, no. 16/17/18 (Fall/Winter 1986/87), pp. 69–93.

3) James Benning in conversation with Barbara Pichler and Claudia Slanar. All direct quotations and references unless noted are taken from a series of interviews with the editors in California and Vienna in spring and autumn of 2006.

MFA program in filmmaking that he will complete in 1975.

Apart from his earliest works on 8mm, most of the films belonging to this particular period have survived. They already reveal the presence of motifs and strategies that are later to become formative to Bennning's work. The initial visual experience that Benning will not be able to get out of his mind and that eventually leads him to make films is seeing *Meshes of the Afternoon* (USA 1943) by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid. "One afternoon in the early 1960s, I was flipping through the four channels on my television set. (...) Somewhere between *American Bandstand* and *Cooking with Bretta Greene*, images crossed the screen that were completely foreign to me. They changed my way of seeing and thinking."[4]

Meshes of the Afternoon not only triggered Benning's interest in a 'different' kind of imagery, it also provided a paradigm for his attempt (unconscious at the time) to orient himself toward an avant-garde tradition that was frowned upon, if not entirely forgotten, given the dominance of structural film.[5]

In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Maya Deren uses a number of medium-specific characteristics to narrate the fragmenting logic of a dream, with its principles of condensation and displacement, rather than to follow a consistent narrative. Conventions of traditional narrative editing, such as dissolves and shifting camera angles, as well as animation techniques like stop-motion or jump-cuts, are used to break down the time-space continuum and dislocate the protagonist as well as the viewers, who are thereby caught in a visual delirium.

James Benning also uses dissolves and shifting camera angles in his first 16mm film work. *did you ever hear that cricket sound?* (1971) is a short black and white study that shows a man crawling on his belly, looking straight into the camera. This shot cross-fades with a moving train which in turn is cross-faded with iron bars. In a later shot the protagonist is seen running in slow motion toward the camera which is positioned on the ground in an open meadow. Although the elements of a story are connected through the protagonist, their sequencing gives them an associative logic, like indecipherable dream images. Graphic structures like leaves of grass in close-up and metal bars are shot on high-contrast black and white film highlighting

4) James Benning, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 1 (Fall 1998), p. 55.

5) Filmmakers to be named in this context are i.e. Maya Deren or Stan Brakhage. Their poetic, expressive approach was defied by followers of structural filmmaking who, in contrast, emphasized concept, perception and the materiality of the film strip.

Benning's interest in textures and the composition of a two-dimensional picture surface.

His subsequent film, *Time and a Half* (1972), continued with experimentation along these lines. Benning would later remark, "I hadn't seen much except theatrical film, so it was logical for me to begin with scripted, fictional, documentary narrative."[6] He tells the simple story of a day in the life of a factory worker. The film begins with the ringing of an alarm clock. Thereupon follow everyday tasks: getting dressed, eating breakfast—as prepared and served by his silent wife—walking to work, operating a drill; then the lunch-break, back to work, returning home, evening meal, watching television and going to bed till shortly before the alarm clock rings again, signaling a monotonous routine. Black and white images of the everyday fluctuate between extreme close-ups and shots zooming in on the body of the man—strategies not typical of Benning's later works. The scooping of a fried egg, his mouth chewing food, his face during work, his skin and hair while he sleeps are the literal and palpable expression of a physicality beaten down by the everyday. This stands in contrast to dreamlike sequences that interrupt the daily routine as dictated by the rhythms of the alarm clock and industrial machinery. These reveries are triggered by the figure of a young woman on the bus to work. Sexual fantasies about her, daydreams of fishing and running up stairs all mix with the work process as dictated by the rhythm of the drill. The protagonist's daydreams act on his subsequent 'real' dreams: the image of flight recurs. He is ultimately hit by a train through the image of a dissolve.

Time and a Half already combines various forms of film aesthetics: the semi-documentary character of the bus-ride, the distanced and exact observation of working the machine, and finally, the subjective dream sequences, whose illogic is evoked by the use of imagery on negative. The drill signals a transgression of boundaries; successive, close-up shots of the drill are used as a structuring element that creates rhythm. The movement of the drill not only provides the beat for the rhythm of everyday life and the outbreak of the protagonist's fantasies, but also for the film itself—a point which is made clear halfway through the film with a long, precise sequence dedicated to the mechanism of the machine.

The post-synched soundtrack perfectly contributes to the oppressive and uncanny character

6) James Benning quoted in Scott MacDonald, "An Interview with James Benning and Bette Gordon," *Afterimage*, vol. 9, no. 5 (December 1981), p. 12.

of the film: a combination of factual sounds, directly connected to the narrative, and a more or less abstract grinding noise. "At first I was fascinated by the power of film not only to portray emotions on the screen, but to elicit emotions from the audience."[7] In *Time and a Half*, these emotions are strongly conveyed via the soundtrack. The structural qualities of the sound—the narrative possibilities enabled through diegetic and extra-diegetic sources of sound and their combination with the image—are of great interest to Benning in this early phase of his filmmaking. Possibilities of breaking open or structuring narration are already being broached. He begins to use the rudimentary form of a technique that will be decisive for such films as *11 × 14* or *One Way Boogie Woogie* and his idea of "spherical space,"[8] the appropriation of images and shots from one film as encapsulated narratives for another. These texts open up new associative spaces within their altered context as quotes, or even serve as his own 'found footage'. In interviews, Benning would often refer to his experiences as a factory worker operating a drill, the grueling nature of the work, and the qualities of the experience that interested him: "After four, five months of that I quit, I couldn't stand it anymore. (…) But what I liked about it was that you would interact with this machine. (…) Right away, even making *Time and a Half*, it was about time for me and the timing of that machine, even though I didn't make it as a structuralist film I dealt with that [sense of] time." These autobiographical motivations behind his work, here more or less in the tradition of Maya Deren, as a direct representation of a conflict between psychic experience and physical environment, will dominate all his future films. The displacement of the conflict upon structural/formal levels will continually yield new and surprising visual results.

Honeylane Road (1973) further tests out narrative forms and their fragmentation: The bleak mood of the first two films is avoided in large part thanks to the use of color combined with a playful approach to images whose vehemence is reminiscent of Pop Art. The mode of an entirely internalized and psychologizing perspective as a narrative gesture is shifted to the medium itself

7) James Benning quoted in Peter Lehman/Stephen Hank, "11 × 14: an interview with James Benning," *Wide Angle*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1981), p. 13.

8) James Benning applies the term 'spherical space' to his use of recurring audiovisual motifs in a given film and to his "cross-references" between "spatial manipulations and formal experiments." With reference to Michael Snow's *La région centrale* (Canada 1971) he aims at a non-linear reading of a film and a "more complex perception" of time, place and narrative. James Benning, "On Place," *Frame Work*, no. 13 (August 1980), p. 28.

and its constraints. *Honeylane Road* is about a man who wants to buy a pistol at a pawn shop and is prevented from committing suicide. This story is nonetheless incomprehensible upon initial viewing, despite the brevity of its six minutes. In terms of its structuring elements, the narrative trajectory is broken down in various ways: the approach towards and entering of the pawn shop is repeated from a slightly shifted perspective or accompanied by an altered soundtrack. Laconic close-ups of living room interiors alternate with images from entirely other contexts: a man in a nylon mask is madly laughing in front of a brilliant blue background; a baseball game is shown from the perspective of a pitcher, the pitch being repeated several times; a naked woman is seen from behind, gliding along the side of a pink Cadillac, as if in a slow-motion trance—later she will be seen again, lying in bed. The storeowner asks the protagonist, "You're going in or you're going out?"—the viewer is in a similar predicament: can we fill in the gaps and understand the connections of a deeply individualized narrative style or will we stay 'outside'? Like in prior works, the sound fluctuates between extremely clear and recognizable noises that do not necessarily correspond to the picture—a faucet dripping, street noise or a telephone conversation—and an indefinable, abstract buzz. The rhythm is shaped by the rapid shifting between close-ups, slow motion and jump-cuts that culminate towards the end of the film. The graphic treatment of the image is painterly, the screen organized into fields of color and utilizing a highly saturated palette. For the first time, Benning turns his attention to compositional questions in terms of the two-dimensionality and spatial depth of the filmic image.

As with *Time and a Half* the narrative is built around scenes of everyday life, but the location has changed. Benning has moved his residence from a place of industrial production to the bohemian context of student life in a small town. He hereby comes closer to the world of the contemporary avant-garde.

Interludes

Two works, undertaken in the interim, map the progression from *Time and a Half* to the playful and humorous narrative approach of *Honeylane Road*. In a sense, these 'commissioned works' provide an initial field of experimentation and help to develop the particular sense of humor characteristic of Benning's later works.

Art Hist. 101 (1972) is a portrait of Benning's friend Mike Milligan, who is approaching the conclusion of his ceramic studies at Illinois

University. In a crude mix of youthfully impetuous ideas like the staging of his own death complete with a theatrical burial, Benning pursues Milligan's performances while building beyond them. He uses methods tested in prior works such as close-ups, interest in textures and different levels of an entirely synthetic soundtrack: fragments of an art historical lecture about Michelangelo's frescoes in the Villa Medici, the recurrent sound of a pinball game and the original sound of the funeral scenes weave their way through the film. "We made this crazy kind of juvenile art school film. (…) I made that right after *Time and a Half*, so I was ready to do something that was not so serious." Benning tries to superimpose this 'not-so-seriousness' through micro-dramas—to connect narratives in which Milligan performs but that have more to do with the visual rendition of a joke or word play. A car hits a stop-sign driving backwards. A man rises out of a pond holding a sign in his hand which announces a burp, only to sink back down into the pond. As in early cinema, the joke is unambigously staged and transpires within the confined space of the location. The frame is clearly defined through the actors and objects of the plot. The technique of these one-shot sequences, here concerned with visual puns, will further occupy Benning. Many years later, he will describe the motivation behind *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977) as an interest in the specificity of a location and its perversion through these "silly narratives that happen but shouldn't happen there, which are out of place." The puns that are inserted in *Art Hist. 101* function in a similar way while formal stringency, in terms of framing and off screen space, is yet missing.

Ode to Muzak (1972) is also a contractual work, commissioned for a television show dedicated to Henry Mancini, the renowned film composer. Young filmmakers were to be compensated with a modest sum and given the chance for a nationwide screening to showcase their work. Actually this support was probably in the interest of TV stations who wanted to produce cost-efficient programs. The basic condition is that the filmmakers use a piece by Mancini. Benning chooses *A Shot in the Dark* from *The Pink Panther* (Blake Edwards, UK/US 1963). He takes the title literally and films a long tracking shot of a neighborhood largely inhabited by blacks from out of the window of a streetcar. This shot is repeatedly interrupted by a close-up of a woman putting on lipstick and the image of a man preparing and shooting up heroin. Considering how the glaring, saturated colors clash with what is depicted, that the scandalous scenes as well as the vernacular cityscapes of Midwestern

suburbia have nothing in common with Henry Mancini's entertaining sound of the 1960s, and that Benning increasingly distorts the music over the course of the film, it is little wonder that Mancini as well as the producers hate the film. *Ode to Muzak* is never shown on television.

James Benning is looking for the 'right' form of artistic expression in this early phase of creativity—analogous to how the search for a fitting lifestyle is tied to often changing places of residence. He produces 'finger excercises', experimenting with form and structure: "What's interesting about all that early work is I have no idea where I am, I'm kind of grabbing at things seeing what can fit and what I'm interested in. They're just a playful exercise, nothing more than that."

His short works as of 1973, in contrast to earlier efforts, reveal an interest in the materiality of film, exploiting its technology, exploring optical possibilities and perceptual phenomena unique to the medium. He was, presumably, inspired along these lines by the contemporaneous collaboration with artist Bette Gordon.[9] In the subsequently lost *57* (1973), Benning manipulates the found footage of an exploding tomato through his use of bleach in the film developing process. The film's structure is informed by its manipulation of shooting strategies and the technology of film reproduction.

Between the time of *8½ × 11* (1974), the first film to arouse greater recognition in the film scene, and its 'twin' *11 × 14* (1976), he also produces *Gleem* (1974), *An Erotic Film* (1975), *Saturday Night* (1975) and *3 minutes on the dangers of film recording* (1975). *Gleem* and *An Erotic Film* (both of which no longer exist) are made using the optical printer and attest to the artist's attempt—as in the previous application of found footage—to use the technical possibilities of connecting story with structure. He interweaves two short sequences of tooth brushing and masturbating (*Gleem*) and experiments with negative and positive copies of a scene, which in turn is presented as a double-projection (*An Erotic Film*).

In *Saturday Night* (1975), Benning deploys the animation technique of matting. We see a person we eventually recognize as a man rolling a stocking up his leg as he slowly stands up and leaves the frame. The action, which is observed by a static camera, takes place in the corner of an empty room. Through windows on the left

9) Bette Gordon is a New York-based filmmaker best known for her feminist-oriented independent films. Her filmography includes *Luminous Motion* (1998), *Variety* (1983), *Empty Suitcases* (1980), *Exchanges* (1978–79), *Webbs* (1976), and *Go Go* (1973).

and right the blue sky with clouds passing overhead and later the moon are visible. Two different temporal dimensions occupy the frame: the brief 'stocking performance' takes place in real time while an entire day passing outside is matted into the windows. This interlinking of different modes of time and reality produces a surreal and dream-like setting related to Benning's first films. The soundtrack, consisting of a squeaking, rubbing noise and a barking dog, once again contributes to this eerie atmosphere.

The fact that Benning appears before the camera—an element of performance from which he refrains in the longer films that follow—is probably influenced by his collaboration with fellow-artist Bette Gordon. The "telling of selves"[10]—the personal narratives—will shift from a performative dimension of the body to language, text and non-indexical images. In addition to an interest in the materiality of film and its immanent structure, *Saturday Night* is noticeably concerned with time and duration; the staging is obviously theatrical, the closed nature of the plot is disturbed through the dimension of time via the window which doubles the film frame. At the same time, this demands greater attention: one's own perception is confronted by multiple spaces and their individual temporal modes within a single shot, and has to adapt and concern itself with the interlinking of off- and onscreen space.

The last 'interlude' in the series, *3 minutes on the dangers of film recording* (1975), marks the transition to Benning's ostensible 'structural' phase.[11] He starts teaching at Northwestern University and takes part in a student film project. After being interviewed by the student filmmakers he uses this section of the documentary to once again engage the optical printer. The image shows a close-up shot of his face throughout the film answering the students' question, "What do you feel about the interaction between the radio, the TV and the film division?" These words as well as his answer are displaced to such a degree that they reveal their meaning only through gradual repetition: "Before I answer that I probably should say something about being filmed and tape-recorded. I think it's real dangerous to do that because people see those things and listen to those things in the future and they think you believed that then ... uhm ... and if this is played in five or six years from now they'll think I still believe those things, that's

10) For an exploration of this concept as defined by Adam Phillips, see Julie Ault's essay in this volume, p. 98.

11) On the problem of being perceived as a structural filmmaker see Barbara Pichler's essay in this volume, pp. 21–46.

the danger. Uhm ... it's a real danger to me because I don't know if I even believe what I just said."

Benning uses his short, three-minute response to playfully treat questions that at the time are decisive to structural filmmakers and will be of concern to subsequent generations of filmmakers and artists: the economy of perception, the production of meaning in film and the revealing of its mechanisms. He approaches an experimental practice that ties his interest in structure and systems of order (as with Hollis Frampton) to the production of meaning through games, jokes or coincidences (as with George Landow / Owen Land), producing similar effects. "I did something like Frampton without knowing Frampton had done that when I had made *3 minutes ...*"

However, the possibilities offered by the optical printer appear to be exhausted after *3 minutes ...*: "The optical printer seemed always kind of tedious, kind of how do you get beyond the gimmick of the optical printer itself. (...) But maybe it's just the printer itself, I never really got beyond that."

Collaborations/Experiments in Structure

Benning's collaborations with artist Bette Gordon constitute one phase of his film work that has been neglected until now. This is undoubtedly due in part to their limited availability as well as their difference from his more well-known early works such as *Time and a Half* or *8½ × 11*. He spontaneously begins to work with Gordon in 1973 while still a student, most likely influenced by their personal relationship.[12] Their mutual interest in alternative forms of narrative combined with a curiosity in the technical possibilities of film equipment results in three films.

Michigan Avenue is made in 1973 and consists of three shots: an everyday street scene—people walking by in the foreground, cars in the background; two women looking straight into the camera; the two women lying on a bed. These shots are strictly separated from one another through the use of fades from and to pink leader that frame the beginning and end of each shot. Benning would later comment on this strategy to which he returned with *11 × 14*: "It is

12) "The collaboration happened spontaneously" (Gordon). "I remember that Bette was going to make a narrative film about two women. (...) She started the film, but somehow it changed from a somewhat straight-forward narrative to an optically printed film." (Benning) Both quoted in MacDonald, "An Interview with ...," p. 13.

an interesting concept to me to try to formalize something that is generally coincidental to the filming process."[13] As a "metaphor for the workings of persistence of vision in film,"[14] *Michigan Avenue* broaches one of the fundamental principles of the filmic apparatus and the possibility to reproduce movement. The three scenes are extremely slowed down and their speed is varied through the use of the optical printer. At first, the street scene appears to be a still photograph: every frame was copied 58 times with a slow dissolve from one frame to another, resulting in a very slow motion. Over time, the eye begins to perceive minimal movements. The second part of the film is a 'portrait' of two women. Each frame was optically printed 24 times. The movement is somewhat faster than in the first segment, and in addition the viewer's eye has already adapted and knows what to look out for. The dark-haired woman strokes the hair of the blond who slightly turns her head—the blinking of her eyes, the literal wink of an instant, is made visible. In the third scene, the dissolves between frames become recognizable. Benning alternately prints the third and the fifth frame of each successive second from the original sequence: we see the one frame of the first second from the original sequence for one second, dissolving into one frame of the original's subsequent second which is likewise held for the duration of one second, dissolving into one frame of the third second, etc. The effect rendered is kindred to a slowly dissolved slide show of still images that chart the movements of the two women. They are lying on a bed that stands parallel to the frame. The woman in the foreground slowly turns herself ever further toward the viewer, eventually gliding out of bed with her back to us.

Michigan Avenue presents themes that are essential for the collaboration of Benning and Gordon: the immanent qualities of film and its linearity; the frame and framing; perception of duration and movement as categories of time and space; and finally, the organizing of a story and its performative aspect based upon these parameters. The films that are produced in this phase of Benning's work demand a different kind of concentration. The playing with sight lines and economies of attention shifts the scene of action beyond the space of the image to the audience itself, demanding an active and reflective attitude of the viewer.

For Bette Gordon, aspects of feminist film theory being developed at the time were of

13) Lehman/Hank, "*11 × 14*," p. 14.

14) Bette Gordon quoted in MacDonald, "An Interview with …," p. 13.

From top to bottom:
Ode to Muzak (1972),
Honeylane Road (1973),
Michigan Avenue (1973)

central importance. "It showed my own concern for investigating narrative, and specifically the representation of the female. I want to force narrative away from simple story-line and character identification, to problems of representation, language, and the reading of the film text."[15] Benning for his part is concerned with a new way of treating time and the spatial organization of movement. He continues with the decoupling of sound and image synchronicity as undertaken in his earlier works: ocean sounds are mixed with traffic noise in the first scene, superimposed with a whispering woman in the second scene, and entirely dominating the sound of the third scene.

Benning indicates that his ability to operate the optical printer became the basis of his collaborative role. This classically gendered division of labor was purposely undermined in the following film, with both artitst taking equal part in every phase of production—a fact that Benning stresses. *i-94* (1974) is once again optically printed, strictly alternating between individual frames selected from two distinct actions: a naked woman walks away from the camera while a naked man walks toward it, on a railroad track under a highway overpass. Passing cars appear as ghosts on the bridge through the superimposition of the two images, while the central perspective of the railroad track below vanishes in the distance.

At the beginning, we see close-ups of the woman's back which is turned to the viewer, the man stands at the far end of the tracks in the background. They start moving toward each other and meet in a flickering superimposition of bodies. They quickly melt into one, and then drift apart till the torso of the man can be seen in the foreground, entirely filling the screen.[16] We are following the unfolding of two simultaneous plots. In this context, Scott MacDonald makes reference to the Thaumatrope as a precinematic apparatus that likewise works with the principle of the persistence of vision.[17]

15) Ibid. p. 13.

16) The soundtrack features Benning and Gordon talking simultaneously. "The volume of her comments—she reveals her frustration at not being taken seriously—is progressively lowered as the volume of Benning's comments—he talks about changes he's been going through—is raised." See MacDonald, "An Interview with ...," p. 13.

17) Thaumatropes were simple, optical toys making use of the persistence of vision. Popular during the Victorian era they employed a disc with a picture on each side, which is attached to two pieces of string. When the strings are twirled quickly between the fingers the rotation of the disc makes the two pictures appear to combine into a single image, the most popular subject being a bird in a cage. Based on an entry for "Thaumatrope" in Wikipedia, accessed in August 2007 www.wikipedia.org.

The visual allure of the film is significantly emphasized by a pictorial space organized according to a central perspective. This is made apparent via a vanishing point in the background while the highway bridge runs parallel to the picture frame. "I like the way the place looks: the railroad track accentuates the Z axis, and yet the highway overhead is very flat, so that the trucks passing over create a lateral movement, compared to the way we move perpendicularly through the frame."[18]

Benning's fascination with perspective also finds expression in the last of their collaborative films, *The United States of America* (1975).[19] This road movie that traverses the US radically inverts background and foreground. The technical conditions are simple: A camera is affixed to the backseat of a car, shooting the driver and the passenger from behind. They take turns at the wheel, flanking both sides of the screen. Benning describes the production process: "We had a button in the front with which we could trigger the camera that would run on a wild motor and batteries. We had ten to fifteen seconds for each shot and used pretty much all the footage we shot. All the sound was recorded on the trip and later edited with the images." What is seen on this trip is exactly what is to be expected: various roads and accompanying infrastructure (gas stations, toll booths, streets), the banalities of cross-country travel (rest stops, traffic jams, sleeping while being driven...) and the spectacle of the landscape. "In a sense," Benning thinks, "the car is the main character," and this is a film for "a nation built on automobiles."[20]

Our attention is turned to the 'performance' of Benning and Gordon in the car's interior, while the action takes place behind the windshield, in the background. The interlocking of different frames—the film's frame, the skewed side windows, the windshield—structures space in a way that is entirely unfamiliar and stresses the qualities and constraints of the optical apparatus. At the same time, the visual composition is reminiscent of a pictorial tradition. Benning and Gordon frame events that are happening in the background as figures at the edge of the picture, doubling for the position of the viewer. Even more than *Michigan Avenue* and *i-94*, *The United States of America* is concerned with seeing, with regimes of the gaze, and traditions of perception.

18) James Benning quoted in MacDonald, "An Interview with ...," p. 14.

19) For more on *The United States of America* see Barbara Pichler's essay in this volume, pp. 29–31.

20) James Benning quoted in Scott McDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 229.

I-94 (1974)

Gordon and Benning again perform in *The United States of America*, heavily loading the form of the film with latent autobiographical content. Of equal interest in this collaborative phase is the development of their different concerns, which are legible in the individual films. Sexual difference and gender politics are of central importance to Gordon who will later continue in this direction. Benning rejects such an emphasis. The political motivations behind his films, more evident in his later works, are engaged in the broadest sense with the raising of consciousness as to processes of perception.[21] This is achieved through a very precise and concentrated manner of 'looking and listening'. *The United States of America* tests this process of perception through forms of staging between calculability and contingency and the conjunction of a meta-narrative with Benning's personal biography. These strategies will become decisive for his later work.

Benning and Gordon eventually stop collaborating due to the difference of their working methods as well as the fact that Gordon's collaborative role is not fully appreciated, due to gender biasing at the time. Benning's move in the fall of 1975 additionally contributes to the split. He starts teaching filmmaking at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois.

Translated by Eve Heller

21) See MacDonald, "An Interview with ...," p. 14

Barbara Pichler

An Iconography of the Midwest

$8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ *(1974) to* Grand Opera *(1979)*

James Benning describes *8½ × 11* as a turning point and *11 × 14* as his first important film. He reaches critical acclaim with *One Way Boogie Woogie* at the latest. It is a very productive period: he makes eight films between 1974 and 1979, all informed by a high degree of diversity, even aesthetic transgression. Nevertheless, it is surprising in retrospect how much of this work feels familiar. Visual and formal preferences established in his earlier films are further developed and from this point on thread through the entire body of his work in various permutations.

Benning shapes an iconography of the Midwest in these films. He shoots at locations where he grew up and where he comes to live—from his hometown of Milwaukee to the various regions and college towns he encounters during brief teaching gigs up to 1980. His art of filmmaking evolves from the margins—seen from a film-historical angle, it enters from the off, reflecting subjectivity and autobiography. The films of this period are also the reason that Benning is categorized as a structural filmmaker and belonging to a "cinema of structure in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film. (...) The structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline."[1]

Benning's short films made in 1976—*Chicago Loop* and *A to B*—clearly correspond to this definition. *Chicago Loop* is a film whose concept is entirely located in its structure. The three segments were edited in camera, and experiment with the fragmentation of space and movement through pixilation.[2] In the first segment, 360-degree pans alternate between moving clockwise and counter-clockwise. Meanwhile, the stationary camera zooms in and out, shooting pixilated images of Lake Michigan and the Chicago skyline. The camera is stopped at 10-degree intervals of the first circular pan, pixilating 16 frames while the lens of the camera is zoomed in by 6mm. The subsequent 'revolutions' follow the same pattern, but the number of frames pixilated at every 10-degree interval is diminished—shooting 12 frames, then 8, 6, 4, 2, 1. The clockwise pans are executed first. The camera lens is closed after each clockwise revolution in order to leave unexposed film stock to shoot a

1) P. Adams Sitney's brief definition, since canonized. See Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979 [1974]), pp. 369–370.

2) Pixilation is a stop motion technique in animated film, where the position of the camera or an object in the frame is changed slightly before shooting the next single frame or frames.

second pass, alternating with counter-clockwise pans. During this second pass, the lens is closed to keep the clockwise pans from being double-exposed. The film was made to be run forward through a projector and, upon reaching its end, to be projected in reverse. The soundtrack consists of a voice counting from 1 to 36 during the 36, ten-degree, clockwise pans. The same voice is heard backwards for the 36, ten-degree, counter-clockwise pans, given that the soundtrack is running in reverse. Segment two travels up and down Wacker Street in Downtown Chicago. On the soundtrack we hear the letters "F" and "B," for forward and backward, indicating the direction the camera is moving. The third segment is shot at Wrigley Field, home of the Chicago Cubs Baseball team. Half of the material is a 360-degree panning shot of the stadium's interior. The other half is shot moving around the outside of the stadium. Again, the two halves are 'sandwiched' together in-camera. On the soundtrack we hear the words "left" and "right." *Chicago Loop* breaks the representation of time and space wide open. Its aural dimension is equally fragmented given the chopped sound of the vocal track. One has the feeling of only a tenuous contact with linear time and space—the governing dimensions of cinema.

A to B (1976) also focuses upon perception, albeit on the production of content and the image as its medium. The film is silent, a piece of paper in a typewriter is the object of attention. *A to B* is in fact an animation film: seemingly arbitrary rows of letters appear on the page via invisible hands. Certain letters—A, B, C, E, F, H, I, L, M, R, T, U—are continually repeated in ever-changing combinations, according to a code that cannot be cracked instantly. The explicit comprehensibility of the film is of secondary importance: the phrase "America the Beautiful" can be made out only for a couple of seconds before it is obscured again by the relentless succession of letters.

The proximity to established experimental film practice and structural film in particular is quite obvious in these works. Amy Taubin, for instance, describes *Chicago Loop* as a "kinetically spectacular film which jams variations of Snow's *Back and Forth* and *Standard Time*, and Gehr's *Serene Velocity* into nine minutes to come up with something different from any of them."[3] At the same time, the pigeon hole of structural film, a categorization Benning himself avoids, is too narrow. Benning stresses that his

3) Amy Taubin, *Soho News* (1976), as quoted on the homepage of the Film Maker's Cooperative Collection, www.angoleiro.com/fcoop.cgi?i=215.

knowledge of film history and the structural movement at this time was still relatively underdeveloped. Instead he attributes his rigorous treatment of sound and image more to his interest in mathematics. It's not that he is "at all offended being called a structuralist,"[4] but he "doesn't consider himself a structural filmmaker, believing he has 'more to say' than those detached formalist experiments usually do."[5] His work is far more influenced by broader tendencies within the American avant-garde film scene. It reflects larger and sometimes conflicting concerns preoccupying the independent film movement of the 1970s—the attempt to reconsiliate structural filmmaking and narration.[6]

4) James Benning in conversation with Barbara Pichler and Claudia Slanar. All direct quotations and references unless noted are taken from a series of interviews with the editors in California and Vienna in spring and autumn of 2006.

5) Danni Zuvela, "Talking About Seeing: A Conversation with James Benning," *senses of cinema*, no. 33 (2004), www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/33/james_benning.html.

6) On determinant elements of the American avant-garde of the 1970s, see Claudia Slanar's essay in this volume, pp. 7–20.

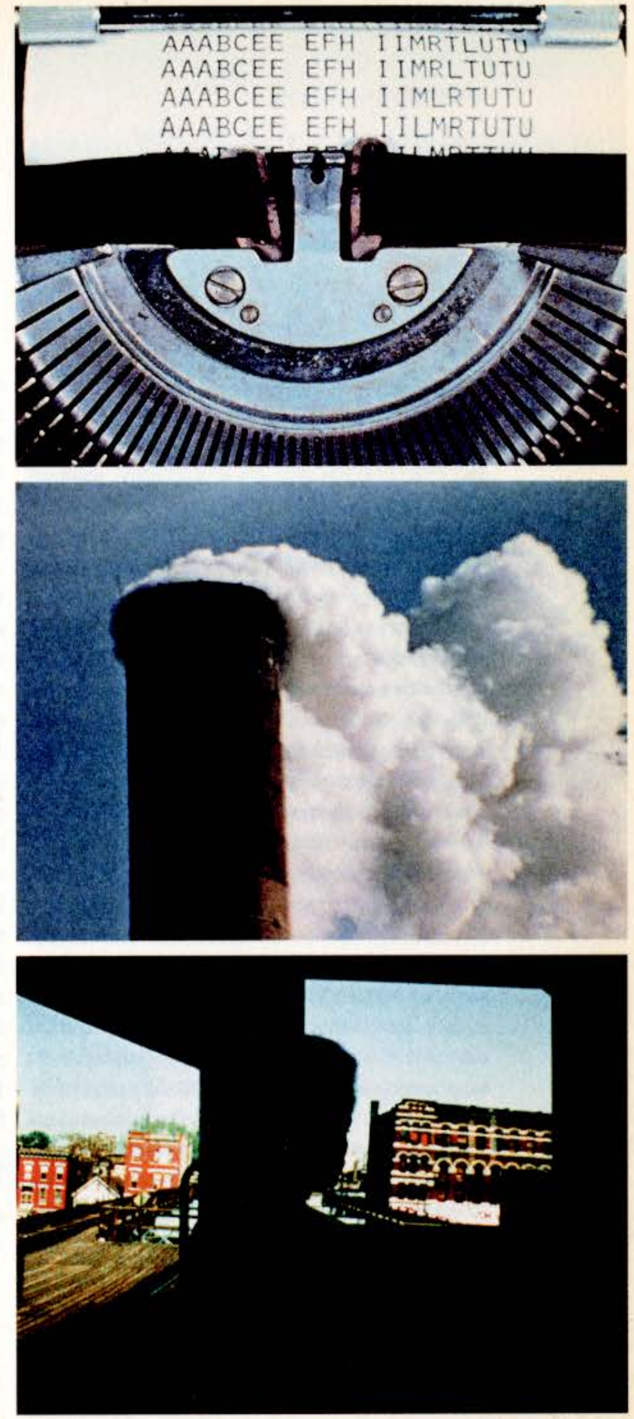
7) James Benning, "On Place," *Framework*, no. 13 (1980), p. 28.

Benning's artistic breakthrough was achieved with the 'twin films' *8½ × 11* (1974) and *11 × 14* (1976). Seen in retrospect, there was only a brief period during which he experimented with a wide array of filmic forms and influences. He now proceeds to concentrate solely upon specific questions and develops his own individual style. *8½ × 11* navigates two parallel story tracks via 33 shots (amounting to 28 scenes) charting two routes of travel that approach one another but never cross paths. The story involves two women in a car and a hitchhiker. Benning conceived the script as a linear narrative that he subsequently broke down into fragments. The project constitutes an experiment with narrative forms and possibilities of reception—film as a form of conceptual art which is not centered on story but instead focuses on image and structure while playing with narrative conventions, thus "revealing the inadequecies of linear narrative and space."[7]

The camera largely captures the action via static, autonomous shots, but there are also occasional tracking shots and pans. A close-up is seen time and again, a device that entirely disappears in Benning's later works. Shots including the protagonists alternate with land and cityscapes. The film travels along various highways and displays a panoramic vernacular of

Midwestern landscapes including gas stations, motels, highway restaurants, and farms. Faint traces of a story weave their way through the material: two women are on the road, they meet two men, they picnic, they spend the night at a hotel, the hitchhiker tries to get a ride. What is not conveyed on screen or via synchronous sound is left out. There is hardly any dialogue and if there is, it is indistinct. The film makes barely enough insinuations to imply motivations that connect scenes and suggest a way of moving through the story. In the final scene of *8½ × 11*, Benning denies the expectation that the various narrative threads will somehow come together in the end. The hitchhiker is seen swimming in a river while the two women drive across a bridge overhead. They make a brief stop before driving on, but they don't take notice of the hitchhiker and vice versa.

Benning expands on these motifs and ideas two years later with *11 × 14* (1976) which is based in part on a cut-up of *8½ × 11*. The material from *8½ × 11*, 11 shots out of 33, gets lost amidst the 65 shots (amounting to 61 scenes) of its succcessor and is further developed through the pursuit of a narrative thread involving one man. For Benning, *11 × 14* is a kind of radicalization of his experiments with narrative forms: "I think it's curious to see *8½ × 11* before you see *11 × 14*, because it actually has a much more coherent narrative. When that film is repositioned within *11 × 14* it is completely lost. People who knew the narrative from the first film would read that narrative into the second film and that was something I was really interested in at that time. And also to construct a narrative that would destroy a narrative that already existed." Suspense arises through playing with audience expectations, requiring the viewer to deal with gaps of meaning. One scene shows a couple in the kitchen. She is doing the dishes, he sits at the table, smoking and drinking. In the background of the shot a naked man is seen crossing a hallway extending from the center of the frame into the distance. Subsequent to this brief appearance, his presence is reduced to the outline of a shadow on the wall. The man in the foreground stands up and exits the kitchen using a side door, shortly re-entering the scene from the back through the hallway. A brief dialogue transpires and then both figures exit the room. Nothing is explained. Similarly, various scenes involving the film's protagonists are never integrated into a causal or psychologically motivated whole. Instead of sinking into the story, one observes it from 'outside'. Yet there is a form of connection between the different scenes which Benning describes as a preliminary draft



A to B (1976, top),
11 × 14 (1976)

of 'spherical space': "I wanted to develop, out of their juxtaposition in a particular way, a non-linear reading of the film as a whole, or what I call 'spherical space'. I try to introduce various visual or audial motifs which recur in shots widely separated in the film. (…) By the time the film is finished, it will have been possible to relate shots in a number of different ways. This sort of cross-referencing is what I mean by 'spherical space'."[8] Recurring motifs, doppelgangers, repetitions, reappropriation of previous material—these pattern-shaping elements allow Benning to construct this spherical space. Fragments of stories are told, only to be overpowered by form. Narrative is released from the theoretical connection of a linear story tied to clearly defined protagonists, instead seeping into every single image of the film. Each shot is a statement that also functions autonomously. Benning stresses this through the use of black frames to distinguish individual shots, or rather micro-scenes from one another. Associative chains within this cross-referencing system remain largely individual. Narrative functions only "as a context for form, so that the real concern is not narrative at all but rather formal considerations of on/off screen space, composition, colour, and sound/image relationships."[9]

In other words, the scaffolding of the film is constituted by formal/aesthetic questions as Benning follows seemingly simple compositional rules. Hardly anyone, and least of all Benning himself, would argue the fact that he creates beautiful and elegant images—images whose aesthetic qualities make them memorable: whether the image of a giraffe at the Milwaukee zoo whose body is framed so that the stripes of its coat appear as an abstract pattern; or a house with a full-moon overhead on a sunstruck day. The beauty of the everyday is depicted in numerous city and country landscapes that populate the films. In one shot, the bottom third of the frame is occupied by a billboard depicting a bathing beauty. She is reclining under a slogan that reads "We've got your sunshine," advertising cheap flights to Puerto Rico. The blue and green tones of the poster are echoed by the big, blue sky. The still composition is suddenly animated by traffic. A subway train horizontally traverses the image, followed by a bus that diagonally cuts through the bottom of the picture space. A seemingly simple composition unifies several of Benning's concerns within the frame of a single image, constituting a story

8) Peter Lehman/Stephen Hank, "11 × 14: An Interview with James Benning," *Wide Angle* vol. 2., no. 3 (1977) p. 14.

9) Benning, "On Place," p. 28.

about how urban space is organized, about the impact of capitalism upon our visual culture, sounding the aural scenery in which we live and thus commenting on everyday life in America. But this shot also broaches the relationship between color and light and poses a fundamental question about composition: the framing of the image continually directs our gaze to the fact of the frame—through movement that leads us beyond its limits or by way of an action that is presented in fragmented form.

In several shots, *11 × 14* circles around relationships between on and off screen space, categories that are brought directly into play. Benning returns to this pivotal concern close to the end of the film by pulling off screen space into the center of the picture. The camera is aimed at the entrance of a bar across the street. Two female protagonists walk into the bar accompanied by a man. The door closes and almost a minute goes by before one of the women tumbles out again, in an apparent state of fear. One glimpses the door opening once again as two men emerge, just before a truck drives up and blocks most of the image. The next time we are returned to the scene, we see the two men fighting with each other. But again what can be seen is limited, this time by the truck driver obscuring our view by opening his tailgate. The fight continues. It is staged in a manner that draws our attention away from the object taking up most of the image: our gaze is focused instead upon a small, compromised space where the fight is happening. When the truck drives away and the camera once again has an unadulterated view of the situation, everything is already over—the two men are gone and the woman is seen running down the street in the distance. Benning here ironically undermines stylistic devices belonging to mainstream cinema. He toys with the thriller genre by withholding crucial information. He plays on aspects of silent film comedy through the slapstick staging of the fight and the dramatically expressive body language of the damsel in distress. But the action of the scene is actually determined by space as captured by the camera. The truck not only divides the image but also segments the narrative, focusing our attention upon conventions, possibilities and limits of storytelling and of what is shown, in summary, filmic parameters.

Benning continues this focus on perception itself by bringing notions of time and duration into play. This is a question that already emerges with *8½ × 11*, almost rising up like a foreign body within the context of an experimental yet fast-moving narrative. A car stops in front of a diner.

The passengers step out and walk into the establishment while the camera remains trained upon the parked car. After about one and a half minutes, a person leaves the restaurant and drives away. This relatively brief test of patience, in comparison to later films, shifts perceptions from the promise of an indicated or expected turn of plot to a concentration on the image itself. In *11 × 14*, this concept finds a far more radical form. Three long takes—the first one lasting over ten minutes, the other two around seven minutes—are built into a succession of 65 shots with various running times. These three shots redefine perceptual and cognitive relations between spectator and image. Additionally, each of these shots visually conveys one of Benning's central concerns.

The first shot happens near the beginning of the film and takes up a narrative formula from early cinema: the phantom ride. In this case, it is a trip with the Evanston Express in Chicago. Benning offers two explanations of the shot. On the one hand, he considers the formal composition of the frame and how one looks out of the window and sees the city: "The front window would be a rectangle and the side window would be a trapezoid. Everything you saw in the window would then show up in the other window, but in a much distorted fashion and at a different speed. So it became a very formal device." The shot presents frames within its frame, providing evidence of the construction and fragmentation of filmic space. On the other hand, the content of the shot is important to Benning. It conveys a political statement that is formulated visually rather than verbally: "The ride starts in the suburbs of Chicago and the train doesn't open its doors until it gets to Chicago. It goes through all the poor neighbourhoods without picking up any people, you ride by all these stations where the poor workers are waiting for a train. I have a black man in the shot, even though it's very atypical that a black man would be in that train." The young man finally exits the train once he has reached the inner city. A white woman takes the seat he has vacated. Different perspectives on the world, perspectives on the image of the world are compactly unified in one shot.

The second of these long takes shows the film's female protagonists. One lies stretched out naked in the foreground, with her back to the camera, her head propped up on her hand. The other woman is partially clothed, lying next to her girlfriend and gently stroking her hair. Their arrangement is reminiscent of classical themes in painting and thereby alludes to pictorial tradition, however, Benning himself stresses

The United States of America (1975)

another point of reference, even if fleeting, to the sexual politics of the time.

The third and final long take captures the image of a smoke stack and its continuously billowing emissions. In terms of image content, the shot is extremely minimal: the topmost part of a tall stack with white smoke and a blue sky. While the image has time to evoke multiple associations, whether with capitalist forms of production or ecological problems, Benning strives for a further effect through his use of duration. At some point, possible connotations become secondary. As the image empties itself of 'meaning', its appearance becomes central: the shifting shapes of the billowing smoke emitted by the stack, the whiteness in contrast to the blue of the sky, the composition of spatial dimensions, the ambient off screen sounds that impress themselves upon the image.

It is little wonder that Benning describes *11 × 14* as his first important film: "When I made *11 × 14*, finally I thought I had something to think about and something to say. I think that's when I really became a filmmaker"—in the sense that the artist found a way to closely bind structure with narrative, to transform their relationship to one another, and to make the "audience look at the frame differently."[10]

During the interim between *8½ × 11* and *11 × 14*—the films that marked Benning's coming of age as a filmmaker—he produced two additional films of medium length (alongside his short films, *Chicago Loop* and *A to B*). The two works continue in this vein of questioning the function of movement and the modality of the gaze in an exploration of attentiveness itself.

"I suppose you could think of *The United States of America* (1975) as a long tracking shot through the States." That's the content and form of the film in a nutshell. Benning makes the film with Bette Gordon while driving across the US in the Spring of 1975, from New York City all the way to California. They spend eleven days on the road gathering material for the film. Brief views are seen from the vantage point of their car as it crosses the continent, an epic trip condensed in time. The United States pass before our eyes in the form of a continuous linear locomotion witnessed through the windshield—a road movie in

10) Jon Jost, "An Interview with James Benning," *Framework*, no. 13 (1980), p. 29

the purest sense of the word. Yet it isn't the countryside, the events of the trip or even its forward momentum that take up our attention. Rather our attention is centered upon the mechanisms of cinema itself and the construction of the gaze while one view of the landscape dissolves into another. Bette Gordon explains that they "went on this trip to make the inverse of a home movie. The trip was created *for* the film. (...) There's really no consistency of time or space in the film; it's the editing that creates a linear whole. It's creative geography. It reminds me of Kuleshov."[11]

The central perspective of the camera references one of the prerequisites of the cinematic apparatus itself, and in fact stresses a monocular form of seeing by providing the image with multiple framings: there is the framing of the windshield that is "transformed into a cinemascope screen," and thereby becomes a screen within the screen upon which the film is projected; the two passengers 'frame' the windshield by flanking its sides; and finally, the actual film frames itself. At the same time, pictorial space is displaced within the film frame: the passengers in the foreground limit the edges of the frame and paradoxically become central to the image. Yet our gaze is directed beyond them, concentrating on the background of the image, the outside that is presented to us. The screen within the screen remains central and continually returns our attention to the gaze enabled by cinema. The experience of such a film is "at once viewing a film and viewing the 'coming into presence' of the film, i.e. the system of consciousness that produces the work, that is produced by and in it."[12]

At the same time, the film does not refrain from engaging elements that clearly have narrative connotations and which Benning and Gordon largely take up through the soundtrack. We are constantly subject to radio broadcasts that accompany the shots. A soundtrack that was formally organized is perceived as an uncontrolled succession of songs, news broadcasts and conversational fragments. One does not hear a single coherent narrative while enroute but rather a profusion of brief stories. "The sound is bound to the image, but also bound to a certain location. It tells stories, it gives you an idea of where you are or what kind of feeling it could

11) Bette Gordon quoted by MacDonald, "An Interview with ...," p. 15.

12) Peter Gidal quoted by Paul Arthur, "Structural Film. Revision, New Versions, and the Artifact," *Millenium Film Journal*, vol. 2 (Spring/Summer 1978), p. 7. Concerning aspects of this interlacing of picture spaces, the inside and outside, see among others MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2*, p. 229 or Julie Ault's essay in this volume, pp. 93–94.

have been to sit in that car"—from the sudden proliferation of preachers that dominate the airwaves in the Midwest to stories about the Vietnam war or about Patty Hearst to the songs that were on power play—"Loving You" by Minnie Ripperton which you can't stand anymore by the end of the film. Sound and image as aesthetic material are of equal significance. Although we cover thousands of miles and see the country through images, it is the soundtrack that opens up the pictorial space. It tells a kind of continuous story about the country through tiny atmospheric shifts. Film as a historic document, as Bette Gordon describes: "(...) the film is more interesting as you get further from 1975—it's historical nature becomes more evident. (...) Now it's more powerful because those events are part of this country's past."[13]

9-1-75 (1975) is another long tracking shot but this time it is limited to a single location: a camping site at Mauthe Lake, north of Milwaukee.[14] It is a trip down memory lane for Benning who used to go camping here as a child. The camera is mounted to the side of a car and shoots at constant speed. The soundtrack consists of sounds taped at the camping site. The idea for this film came from the experience of *8½ × 11* in regard to the long shot in front of the diner. "When I saw that shot, that's about one and a half minutes long, I thought: it goes on forever, it's killing the audiences. Now I wish that would be like ten minutes, but when I saw it then I wondered why I was feeling uncomfortable to see this with an audience. But actually it's the audience that should have more patience. *9-1-75* comes out of that idea: well, why don't we look longer?" The gaze is directed for 22 minutes upon this camping site where nothing much happens. The highly controlled movement of the camera as it winds its way along the roads of this giant area renders a boundless sense of space that is ambiguously defined. Time and again, trees block the light and hardly anything is recognizable. Then the image suddenly opens up to reveal an uninhibited view of the sky.

What upon initial viewing appears as a straightforward and authentic rendering is revealed as a fabrication on closer examination. The film's barely perceptible slow motion is surpassed by a more substantial manipulation of the senses that happens by way of the soundtrack. This is not readily apparent either, since the sound largely consists of recordings Benning

13) Bette Gordon quoted in MacDonald, "An Interview with ...," p. 14.

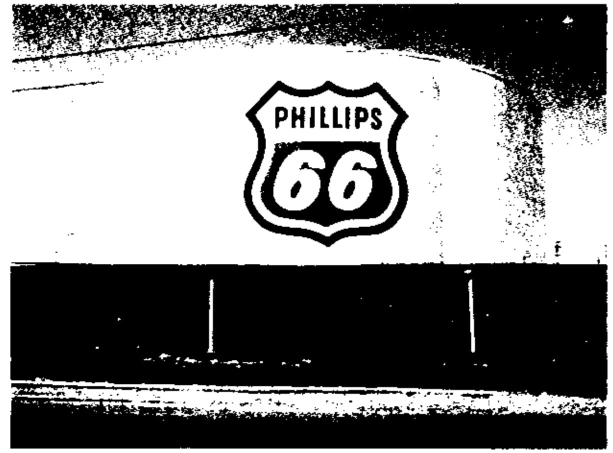
14) James Benning: "Actually it is two 11 minute takes with a dissolve in the middle, but since this is invisible you get the impression of one continuous 22 minute tracking shot."

made on location at the camping site, over the course of two days. He constructs a hyperreal space based on this material, populated by "no controlled actors, only 'documented' campers"[15]—campers who spend their vacation time at a place that has atrophied into a kind of artificial suburbia. This is a copy of everyday life, complete with garden furniture and outfitted with the convenience of every appliance, promising a comfortable and secure life. The more one immerses oneself in this resurrection of suburbia, the more the aural atmosphere changes. The usual noise of a camping site—including children at play, cars, radio transmissions, and television broadcasts—is imperceptibly joined by other sounds, creating a tension that steadily builds. Like the perpetual movement of the car, the sound seems to be entering increasingly surreal territory. The final breakdown of reality is heralded by a Chicago traffic report, and later emphasized by sound effects, especially gun shots, that can be heard right at the end. Once again, as in *The United States of America*, it is primarily the sound that comments on the state of the nation.

In 1977 Benning makes *One Way Boogie Woogie*. It is the clearest and most stringent work from this phase of his career and also his biggest success at the time. It consists of 60 static shots, lasting 60 seconds each, depicting 60 tableaus of his native Milwaukee and its environs. The images present a place of labor and industry through visually stunning shots in saturated colors, of factories, workshops, smokestacks, streets, traffic, and recurring street signs. Benning's camera is not empathic, it is a tool with which he realizes lucid compositions. Movement in this film only takes place within the frame or is conveyed by sound.

Benning directs his gaze upon the vernacular landscape, and yet the choice of location is inspired less by content than aesthetics. It is largely influenced by Benning's interest in Mondrian and Edward Hopper at the time. The title makes this explicit. It refers to a painting by Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, which Benning appropriated because of Milwaukee's many one-way streets—but there are deeper connections. Benning's blocks of color and geometric composition of surfaces are related to Mondrian's aesthetic. He frames the image more tightly than in preceding works, especially stressing these

15) James Benning quoted in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2*, p. 230.



One Way Boogie Woogie (1977)

elements. Benning's connection to Hopper is palpable through the mood conveyed by the lighting and a particular nostalgia that seeps into certain images.[16] His compositions are concerned with the two-dimensional nature of the screen, the transformation of a three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional image, the tension between flatness and depth of image. Movement of cars or people mostly happens horizontally. This principle in turn is effectively interrupted in other shots. For example, a car taking a turn down a narrow street looks like a vector winding its way ever more deeply into pictorial space before driving off into the deep space of the image.

The limitation of the frame becomes the central compositional element of the film through an interlocking of on and off screen space and sound. In the first shot one sees a green fence bordering on big red garage doors. A clattering noise is heard from the outset, but its origin can't be located until toward the end of the scene when a child walks through the shot, dragging a stick along the chain-link fence. A divided and yet synchronous space is created through the use of on and off screen elements, causing the attention to wander and inverting the familiar hierarchy of picture and sound.

Formally speaking, Benning's images indicate a high degree of abstraction. However, *One Way Boogie Woogie* is also captivating thanks to a playful approach to the material, once again found in its marginal narrative elements. The pretense of a unified story is even more radically abandoned than in *11 × 14*, and the narrative moments of brief scenes are compromised within the context of single shots. We see twins standing next to each other, simultaneously lifting their hands, one to sip a drink and the other to smoke a cigarette; a man walks across the frame carrying a Mondrian reproduction; a woman waiting for a ride steps into a car and drives out of the shot, only to reenter the frame from the opposite side of the screen; a man is lying in a parking lot, tied up in rope. This kind of visual 'one line joke' is typical for Benning's brand of deadpan humor—a humor that is staged with formal stringency while not taking itself too seriously.

Benning uses views of the industrial city of Milwaukee as a stage for micro-narratives. He

16) These connections are treated in detail, i.e. by Jonathan Buchsbaum, "Canvassing the Midwest," *Millenium Film Journal*, no. 7/8/9 (Fall/Winter 1980/ 1981), pp. 218–229, or Melinda Ward, "James Benning," *Design Quarterly*, no. 111/112 (1979), pp. 11–15.

visualizes the space employing strict formal and aesthetic standards, transferring the world to another medium in such a way that the objects filmed retain a sense of being images. This at least partially explains why, for the longest time, Benning's work was primarily considered from an aesthetic point of view. The formal stringency of the work, as well as its experimentally narrative and sometimes surreal moments additionally indicate why it wasn't widely discussed in terms of its realism. Benning considers his refusal to accept conventions of mainstream cinema as a political act. "I suppose if I think of my films as dealing with politics, it's with the way you look at the screen. If you look at things differently aesthetically, maybe you'll look at things differently politically."[17] In fact, however, it would not be difficult to put Benning's images to the test of a tangible, political or documentary scrutiny. Like in most of his films, the city and landscapes in *One Way Boogie Woogie* convincingly document a specific social space at a specific moment in time. A sense of place is conveyed that is intricately tied to Milwaukee in its concrete form, but at the same time refers beyond Milwaukee. Recurring motifs like workshops and factories, ubiquitous smoke stacks and street signs, cross-referencing games and a resultant 'spherical space' open up an entirely different way of reading the film. The images of Milwaukee then constitute a kind of meta-narrative about the development of the West's urban industrial zone—a narrative Benning will continue 27 years later when he reshoots the film at the exact same locations for *27 Years Later* (2004).

One Way Boogie Woogie brings formal, autobiographical and documentary elements together using an extremely minimal structure. Perhaps it was due to this clarity as well as the film's tremendous success that the subsequent *Grand Opera* was such a challenge. *Grand Opera. An Historical Romance* (1979) comes across as strangely loose compared to earlier works. The film once again collects shots of recurring motifs: city and landscapes, billboard walls, streets, industrial zones, gas containers, oil drilling rigs, traffic signs—interrupted by short scenes, textual inserts, and experiments with film aesthetics. Benning leaves the strict structure of *One Way Boogie Woogie* behind, even though *Grand Opera* also consists entirely of static shots. But neither their duration nor their

17) James Benning quoted in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2*, p. 231.

Grand Opera (1979)

focal length—from long shots and close-ups to macro-shots—provide cohesion. Benning describes his approach as "sampling without a script," as a game that plays with the material. Access to the film is not necessarily offered by its external form or structure. At first sight, the hybrid nature of *Grand Opera* seems untypical of Benning's work, but upon closer examination, it reveals itself as a kind of comprehensive collage of aesthetic, formal and substantive questions central to his films since the very beginning.

As is to be expected, the narrative is entirely based on the images or their interrelationship. For example, the shot of a monumental sculpture of Jesus with outstretched arms is later echoed by the same gesture of a man depicted on a billboard, accompanied by words that read "We'd love to be your realtor." The images appear as a collection of Americana. Icons of American history—like the Statue of Liberty or Mount Rushmore—meet up with vernacular landscapes, with images of industry and spaces impacted by capitalism. These themes are often combined within one image, like a mural in a parking lot showing a cowboy in a Western landscape—the prototypical image of an American approach to life—accompanied by a Coke advertisement on the soundtrack.

Grand Opera constellates a 'spherical space' in the most literal sense. It utilizes a circular form, although this becomes apparent only at the end of the film. Shot 69 out of a total of 70 shows the explosion of a building that was alluded to in shot 6, through the use of a lengthy textual insert: "(...) the brown structure on the far right that would unexplainably explode." The effect of this explosion is shown in shot 7 as a pile of ashes. This earlier image is a

foreshadowing of the final image, and the first of many that thread throughout the entire film.

Benning also utilizes his mathematical proclivities as a structuring element. Over the course of the film the history of Pi is told in excerpts. One shot in particular is typical of his mathematical obsession and off-key humor. An electric sign mounted on a house unfolds text about Pi which moves like a neon ticker-tape display across the screen. It functions like a long, textual, tracking shot passing through the image and at the same time occupying an actual urban space.

Yet what distinguishes *Grand Opera* and makes it different in relation to its predecessors is its examination of personal history and the history of cinema. Benning describes the film as a "first attempt at writing my own kind of history." One could hardly find a more lovely explanation for the subtitle of the film—*An Historical Romance*. Benning positions himself as a member of the American avant-garde or Independent Film scene at the very beginning of the film, when he quotes Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (Canada 1967). *Grand Opera* begins with black frames and, as in Snow's film, Amy Taubin's off screen voice is heard reading a text. Such direct references to the history of cinema are scattered throughout the film, and can also be understood as a way of contemplating the nature of film as a medium. Economic aspects of film production are alluded to in the form of recurring 'China Girls': exclusively female portrait shots at the beginning of a reel, that lab technicians use for color grading a film print. The theme of film as an industrial process is brought up again when the recurring motif of an American flag is briefly substituted, as if by chance, for the image of a flag with the Kodak logo fluttering in the wind. Needless to say, Kodak is the leading producer of film stock to this day. Benning additionally experiments in an almost frolicsome way with aesthetic and formal aspects of the medium. He plays with moods of light and color, dissolves, fast motion, text and even produces flicker effects: at first alternating "groups of black and white frames; let the first 35 decimals of pi define group size: flicker film: 3.14159265358979323846264338327950288 …," the second time using "ten colors from the rainbow to represent digits from 0, 1, … 9; let the first 100 digits of pi define a color flicker film."[18]

References are also made to theory, as when the filmmaker's daughter Sadie recites the alphabet, concluding her performance with the words "This is for P. Adams Sitney." While this reads as a humorous insert, it also acknowledges that Benning's films are recognized within a certain context and that he has become, however marginally, a part of the avant-garde scene. This is made most obvious by the four filmmakers who appear as protagonists in *Grand Opera*: Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, George Landow and Yvonne Rainer recite a predetermined text in front of the camera thereby perpetuating one of the film's structuring elements: "Keep your eyes on the brown structure. Two planes will pass overhead, it will explode and a mushroom cloud will cover the city." The group appears four times throughout the course of the film, each time in a different order, presenting this ironically reverent homage in a mutation of contexts. Stan Brakhage, yet another avant-garde icon, is revealed as the source of the film's title. In a reversal of Brakhage's dictum that sound holds films back, his voice sounding from off screen is heard over black frames, driving the film forward and at the same time giving it a title: "I'm not against sound films though I rather think of them as grand opera."

Grand Opera denotes a moment of recognition for Benning, alluding to his development as a filmmaker. But it also holds traces of autobiography. A most apparent and impressive example of this is conveyed by a series of 33 circular pans which include every house in which Benning lived since the time of his birth. Each shot begins with a place of residence and then circles on its axis to capture the neighborhood before returning to the house where it began. These images are accompanied by a woman's off screen voice, which ties them to a biographical narrative that is anchored in time through the use of songs—from Billie Holiday (1942), to Jimi Hendrix (1967), to Patti Smith (1977). Self-referential material is also visible in a collage-like reappropriation of Benning's own footage. This is most evident in the new version of *The United States of America* contained within *Grand Opera*. Benning takes one second from each shot, traveling across the country in 99 seconds—"Distance as a function of time: d = rt."[19]

In other words, one can take Benning's message literally when he intentionally misquotes George Landow: "This film is not about you. It's about its maker."[20] *Grand Opera* was not well received by contemporary critics because of its loose structure and love of form. Above all, Benning was accused, sometimes bitterly, of an

18) Descriptions taken from the art magazine *October* which printed various stills and the film's 'screenplay', "Sound and Stills from *Grand Opera*," *October*, no. 12 (1980), pp. 22–45, p. 25 and p. 31.

19) Ibid., p. 26.

20) Originally "This is a film about you, not about its maker," in *Remedial Reading Comprehension* (George Landow, US 1970).

impertinent approach to the history of experimental film while including himself in the scene, and of making inside jokes that closed the film off from a larger audience.[21] Even though *Grand Opera* might seem like a big jumble of ideas, the vehemence of these reproaches is difficult to comprehend in retrospect—perhaps the humor and playfulness of the film are easier to appreciate from a distance.

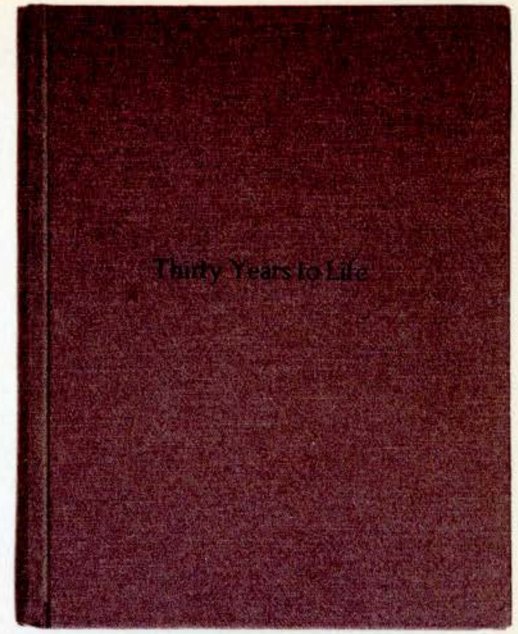
Grand Opera was a big experiment for Benning, a further step along the way of developing his own filmic language, even if it is not always easy to recognize in this 'wild' form. Benning found his themes during the years he spent in the Midwest. He established motifs that thread through his career, reaching beyond the individual films and referring to an entire body of work. These elements include composition; arguments with filmic conventions and perceptual mechanisms of cinema—whether in terms of narrative forms, the connection of on and off screen space, image and sound; the fascination with the everyday culture of America. One could also maintain that Benning's lifelong interest in the land and cityscapes of the US begins at this juncture. He embarks on variations of the roadmovie genre, informed by his ambivalent attitude toward the country of his birth and containing a mixture of fascination, critique and irony. He himself puts it nicely when making reference to *A to B*. "America the Beautiful is part of the politics of all my films, I guess. So *A to B* is a kind of title film of all my work."

But there is one respect in which *Grand Opera* can be seen as an end point. Benning describes the film as the end of his "structural concerns," a statement which Scott MacDonald comprehends as a film historian when he says that the film "can be understood as a requiem for what P. Adams Sitney called 'structrual' filmmaking: as if to signal the end of that movement, the film concludes with an image of a building—a structure—being demolished."[22]

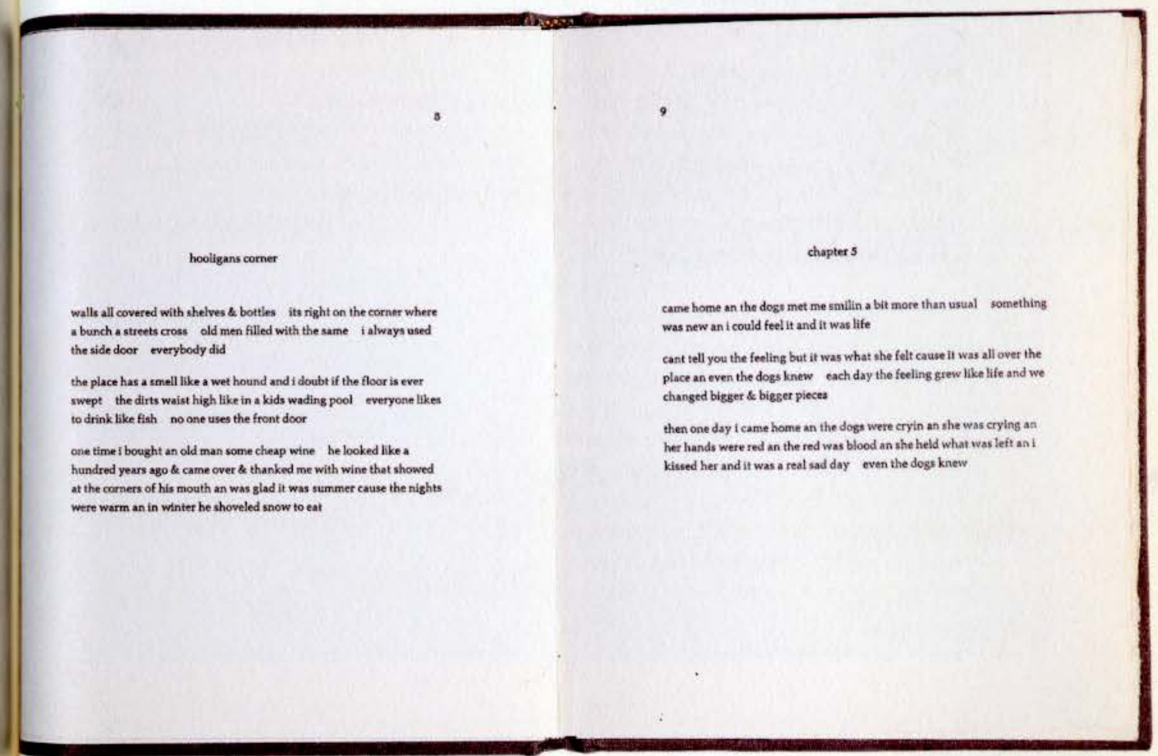
Translated by Eve Heller

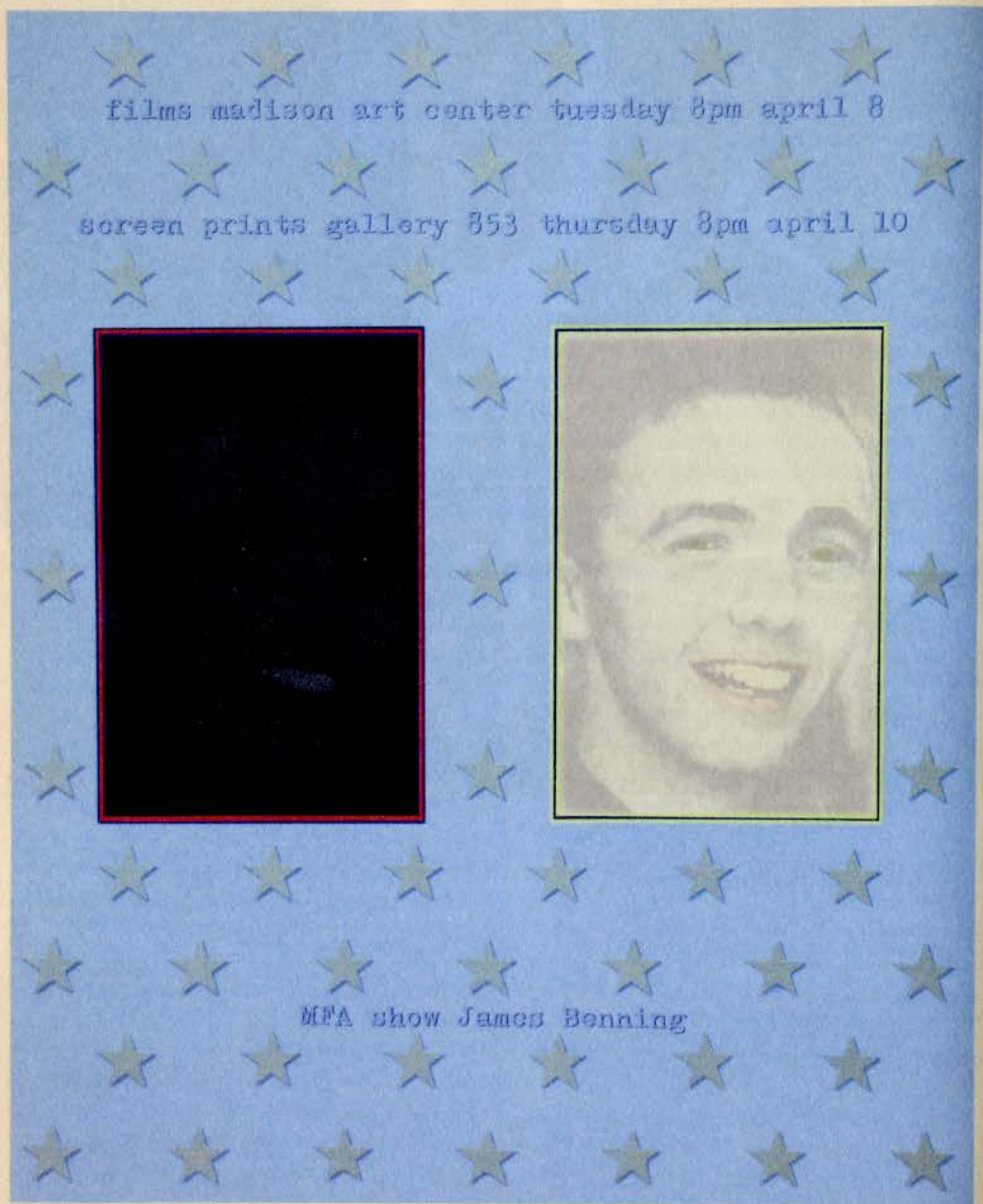
21) I.e. Rosenbaum, *Film. The Front Line 1983*, pp. 55–58. Benning himself likes to recall the harsh critique of B. Ruby Rich.

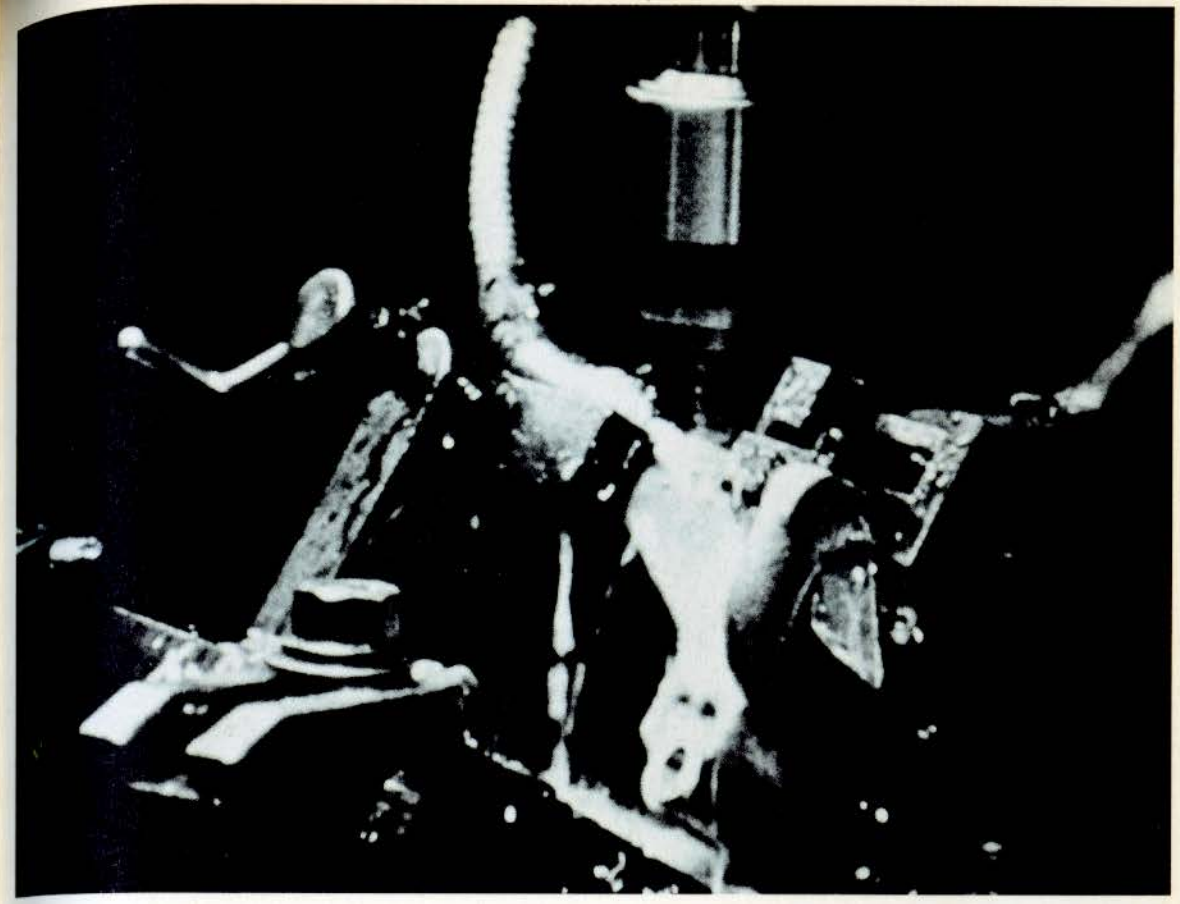
22) Scott MacDonald, "American Dreams," in *Film Quarterly*, no. 4 (1987), p. 17.



James Benning, *Thirty Years to Life* (1973)





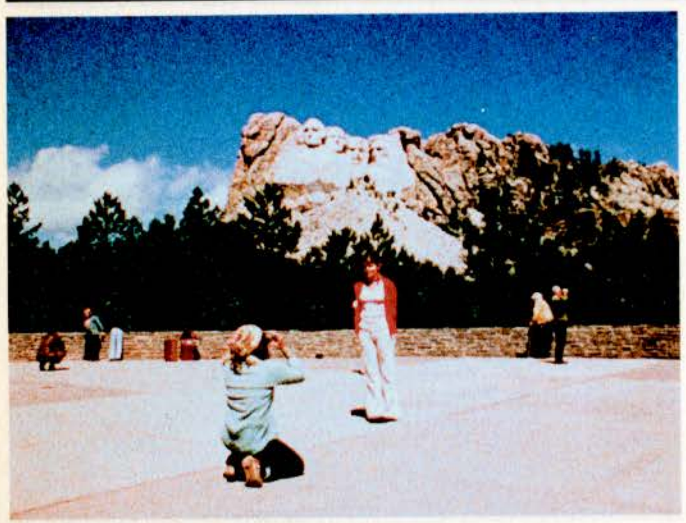


Time and a Half (1972, above)

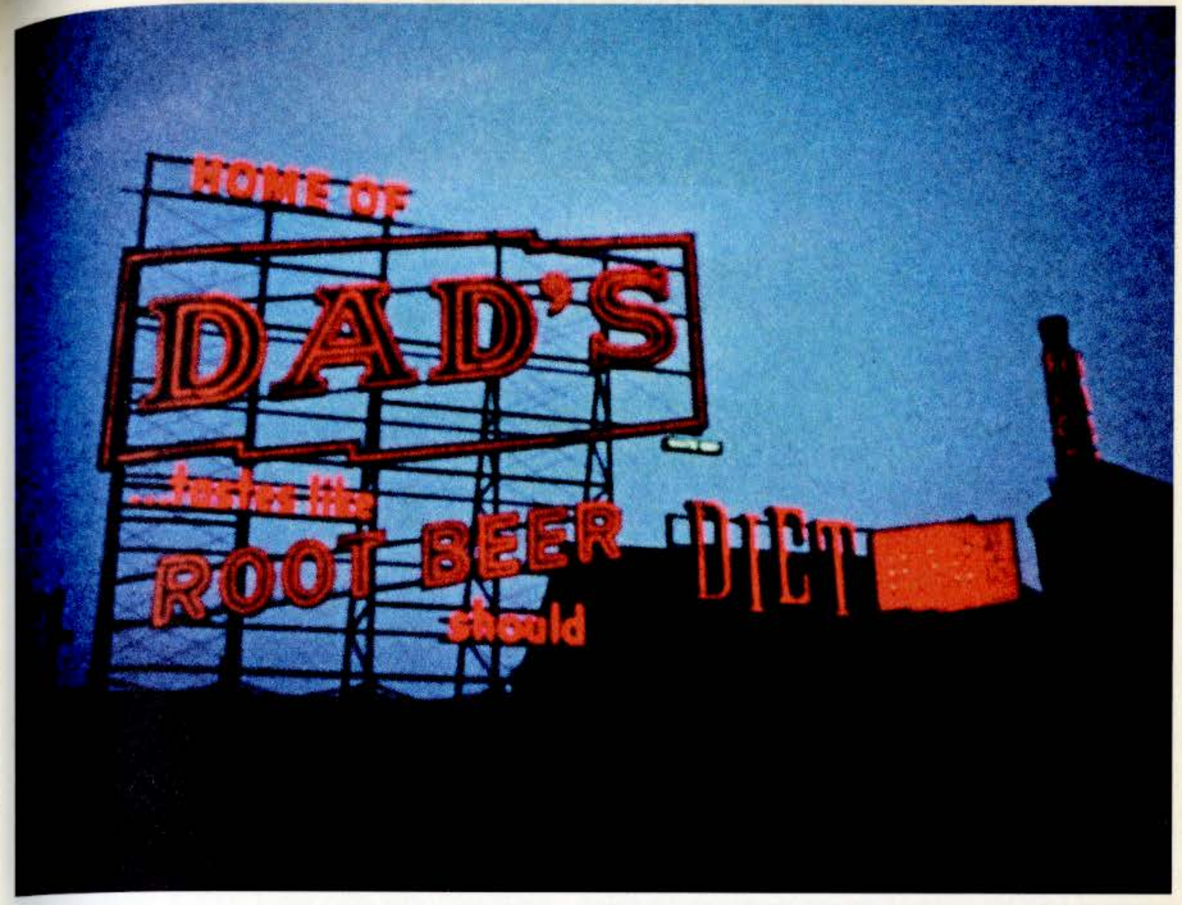
James Benning,
silkscreen for his MFA show (1975)

Honeylane Road (1973)

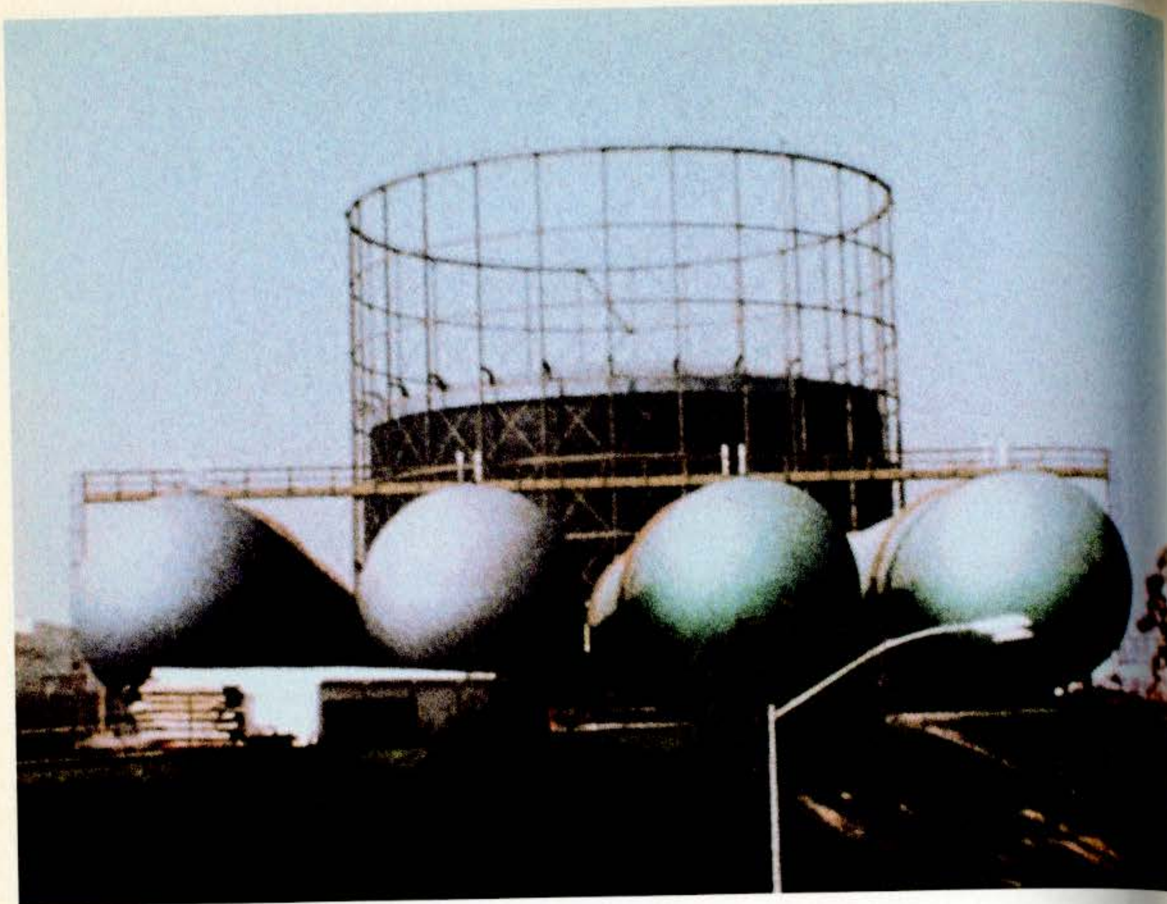
Michigan Avenue (1973, top)
8½ × 11 (1974)



The United States of America (1975, top)
11 × 14 (1976)



One Way Boogie Woogie (1977)



Grand Opera. An Historical Romance (1979)

James Benning

Off Screen Space / Somewhere Else

In 1977 while shooting *One Way Boogie Woogie* in my native Milwaukee, I filmed my daughter running a stick along a chain-linked fence making it sing. It is quite a simple shot. A static camera runs for exactly 60 seconds. A building with red garage doors is framed from the front, a green chain-linked fence is to its right with a rectangle of blue sky above the fence. If you squint you see blocks of red, green, and blue—a Mondrian painting. If you don't, it looks more like an Edward Hopper. For 50 seconds you hear an off screen noise that gets louder and louder. Finally a little girl of four, my daughter Sadie, enters the frame from the right, dragging a stick along the fence, revealing the source of the sound. When the stick leaves the fence, the noise stops—here a few people in the audience always seem to laugh—and Sadie crosses the frame exiting to the left. It remains quiet. The 50 seconds of stick-noise makes the fence seem a city block long, or the length one imagines a little girl can run in that amount of time. The absence of noise at the end suggests there is no fence to the left, or that the little girl is tired of her game. No matter what, the audience now envisions an elongated frame, one that stretches a block or so to the right, and unknown and questionable to the left. In reality however, the fence was only 20 feet at the most, not a block long. Sadie just stood off frame waiting for me to cue her to run along the fence and then through the frame. No sound was recorded during any of the shooting. The sound of the stick against the fence was manufactured later. But note, if the shot had been longer, for example 11 minutes (the length of a 400 foot magazine), the fence could have been made to seem even longer. For me this linking of time, space, and sound is what is most important.

I like the idea that when standing on earth, a spot one foot to your left is just that, one foot to your left. But if you choose to get there by going right, it's a 41,851,445 foot journey.

I returned to Milwaukee again in 1990 during the making of *North on Evers*. I was circling the US on a motorcycle, filming people and landscapes found along the way. Later I animated the handwritten journal I kept (across the bottom of the frame) through the entire length of the film. A portion follows:

It took two days to get to Milwaukee. On the way I stopped in Gary, Indiana. The sky appeared choked and poisoned. The roar of blast furnaces vibrated through the air. I rode around US Steel and was stopped and questioned and told to leave. I made it to Milwaukee by noon. I grew up there.

Recently my mother moved to a group home. She is 85 years old and had been living alone since my father

died in 1972. A few years ago she began to lose her short term memory, and it finally became too dangerous for her to live by herself. The first few times I visited, she thought I had come to take her home.

I spent a month with my daughter. She's seventeen and full of life. We drove in the rain. I said I was glad we weren't on my motorcycle. I told her that the rain really hurts. She rolled the window down and stuck her head out and said it felt just like getting a tattoo.

I haven't lived with her since she was a year old. Yet I think I know her like my parents never knew me. But the last week I was there she told me that just because we get along so well, doesn't mean she doesn't miss me when I'm gone.

And then jumping ahead, now in Utah:

The next day I decided to look for the Spiral Jetty, built in 1970 by Robert Smithson. I remembered that it was somewhere off Rozel Point in Great Salt Lake. Smithson described the surrounding salt flats in his writings. Caught in their sediments were countless bits of wreckage. He said that the site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes.

I went down small gravel roads trying to find Rozel Point, but they either turned the wrong way or disappeared into wheat fields. After four hours I finally found a series of private ranch roads that led toward the lake. The last road was chained off. I parked and walked the last three miles. The Spiral Jetty is a 1500 foot coil, 15 feet wide. I couldn't see it anywhere. Then I found it two feet under water. The lake had risen since it was built. I walked the spiral to its end. I stood there in the salt water. There was no one in any direction. Salt crystals cut at my feet.

I suppose in a way my trip ended there at the end of the spiral. I stared into space. A kind of dizziness overtook my body. I was hot and dehydrated. I had no water. I thought about the secrets of survival that were shared by the desert life around me. For a brief moment I thought this to be the end, that I would quietly succumb to my desolation.

~

In the past two years I have made 16 more trips to the *Spiral Jetty*. Due to rain, snow, and mountain run off, the lake may rise three feet during a single year, and then only because of evaporation (Great Salt Lake has no outlet) drop the same. On the first trip, the water elevation was at 4195.5 feet, the same as when the Jetty was built. The spring rains had washed it clean, the black Basalt rock was bright and shiny. It looked new. Then a storm blew out of Wendover and the lake rose two feet in 15 minutes. The Jetty disappeared. The wind driven rain crossed the lake at 70 mph; the storm passed and the Jetty returned. In two short hours the weather had simulated the Jetty's entire 37 year history. Six months later I found it completely out of the water, covered with crystals, resting in a dry lake bed of salt, sparkling white on white.

The Jetty is a barometer for both daily and yearly cycles. From morning to night its allusive, shifting appearance (radical or subtle) may be the result of a passing weather system or simply the changing angle of the sun. The yearly seasonal shifts and water level changes alter the growing salt crystals, the amount of algae in the water, and the presence of wildlife. The water may appear blue, red, purple, green, brown, silver, or gold. The sounds may come from a navy jet, wildlife, splashing water, a distant car radio, converging thunderstorms; or be a silence so still you can hear the blood moving through the veins in your ears.

Most of the time when I am at the Jetty I am alone. I like it best that way, nothing to steal your attention. Looking and listening takes concentration and patience. But people do come; on a summer weekend, sometimes forty. Half are from nearby Salt Lake City, and of those, mostly families with kids. So for an hour or two the Jetty is a playground. The other half come from around the world—paying homage. During the week there may be a young geologist couple studying the lake, or a few art students running about the Jetty naked. Once there was a young woman in 6 inch heels. All these visitors are quite tame and not too bothersome, except for one time.

I arrived at the Jetty just as the sun rose. Two men were there camping. One of them began to scream. I thought about leaving, but the light was too good, storm clouds loomed to the south, and the distant islands appeared to be floating. I tried to ignore them and began filming. Then the other started jumping up and down on the roof of their old panel truck. After five hours of this, they finally left. Later I found a loaded 12 gauge shotgun lying in the mud near their deserted campsite.

~

After completing *North on Evers* I decided I would need only two criteria to keep making work. One, make films that would take me to places where I wanted to be. And two, make work that would put my life in a larger context. Both somewhat selfish reasons, but very workable. In 1998 these criteria would lead me to make *Four Corners* with a desire to write my own history:

My father bought our house in the fall of 1943. At the time he was working at the Falk Corporation as a laborer assembling landing gear for World War II bombers. He worked the third shift. During the day

he tore out the walls of our new home and completely redesigned and rebuilt its interior. Eight months later we moved in. I was a year old at the time.

Milwaukee had to be a strange place during World War II. My family had moved to America three generations earlier. They came from Germany like most of the other families in our neighborhood. We had no real ties back to the old country, but many of our neighbors did. Some of them were sending their sons to kill their cousins, and the other way around too.

Our neighborhood was built in the early 1900s. By 1950 it was a poor German working class community. Most of the men worked in the industrial valley that separated Milwaukee into north and south sides, or they worked in one of the 50 local breweries, while the women stayed home raising the children. Twenty blocks to the east was Milwaukee's modest black district. The people there worked mostly as unskilled laborers or low-paid domestics. At an early age I was taught to fear that community.

Ages ago this region was covered with water of unknown depth. In time the water found its way to the sea and a heavy bed of drift formed a plain. A period of erosion followed, cutting the valleys nearly as they are today. Then the ice age leveled the summits and deposited a more varied and fertile soil. Today 170 feet of rich earth covers the Niagara limestone and Cincinnati shale that lie below.

When the glaciers receded, some of the ancient Paleo-Indians began to settle in this area. They became the Woodland Indians that left behind effigy burial mounds shaped like lizards that can still be seen today. In 1634 French fur traders were the first white men to arrive. They traded with both the Menomonee and Potawatomi Indians. In 1776 America began, and by 1848, through fraud, retaliation and sale, the Wisconsin Indians lost all their lands. That same year Wisconsin became a state.

The Black Hawk War of 1832 was the last attempt by the Wisconsin Indians to fight against American encroachment. But within a year, the Indians ceded all the lands west of the Milwaukee River. With a population of 200 the town of Milwaukee was created on March 17, 1835. The Potawatomi remained living along the northern cliffs of the Menomonee River valley until 1838 at which time the government drove them out forcefully.

In the spring of 1839 the largest and most remarkable land sale in the history of the federal department of public lands was held. Corrupt speculators who had defrauded settlers elsewhere, as America blindly made its way west, met resistance from a group of Milwaukee homesteaders that had formed a claimants' union. Every parcel of land was sold to the rightful owner at the minimum statutory price of $1.25 an acre.

The population of Milwaukee grew to 20,000 by 1850 due mainly to the large number of German

intellectuals and liberals who had left their homeland after the unsuccessful German revolution of 1848. By 1900 Milwaukee was in a way a more representative German city than any in the Reich, for no city there had so many Germans from all parts of the empire living together in one place.

In the 1880s Polish immigrants, fleeing persecution from czarist Russia and imperial Germany, began settling together in small Church communities on Milwaukee's south side. The Menomonee River valley separated them from the larger German community, a few miles north. Heavy industry would later fill the Menomonee River valley providing employment for both Germans and Poles.

Milwaukee's black ghetto did not emerge until post-World War II. When we moved into our house in 1944 there were less than 3500 blacks living in Milwaukee, about 1/2 of 1 percent of the total population, and nearly all of them lived crowded together in a 24-block area on the near north side. Today there are over 200,000 black residents living in the City of Milwaukee.

At the turn of the century the city annexed the farms of Robert Brown and Bill Sarnow, and my neighborhood was born. Our house was built upon an old apple orchard in 1905. Washington Park opened that same year, just a few blocks to the west. Geese still stop there to rest and feed during their semi-annual migrations.

As a young boy I played baseball in Washington Park all summer long. Blacks from the Core, which the black district was now called, fished for carp in the park lagoon. At an early age I was warned to stay away from them. People in my neighborhood had little contact with blacks, yet there existed a great hatred and fear. I was told they were no good, that they even smelled different.

Slowly the Core grew into my neighborhood. In 1989 my mother was the last white person to move out. She sold the family house for $5000, the same price my father paid 46 years earlier. My old neighborhood at 39th and Lisbon now centers the worst poverty in Milwaukee. About a third of the houses are either gone, partly burned, or boarded up. Aluminum siding has been torn from many of the houses, as high up as can be reached, and sold for scrap yard money. Drugs and prostitutes can be bought openly on the streets.

In 1910 a Socialist government came to power in Milwaukee. It advocated public ownership of all utilities and low cost housing for workers. Milwaukee had a Socialist mayor for the next 50 years. Local labor organized. In 1934 more strikes were held in Milwaukee than any other city in America. Wages increased, but white workers feared their gains would be lost to low-wage black labor. Labor leaders desired to keep Milwaukee white and discriminated against blacks through exclusionary clauses. The small black district remained segregated and poor.

By 1967 Milwaukee blacks were fighting for their

civil rights. Father James Groppi, a radical white Catholic priest, helped lead the way. For 200 consecutive days there were marches and rallies. I was one of a handful of white people that walked along. During a night march to Milwaukee's all white south side, I was beaten unconscious in Kosciuszko Park by a number of poor white kids. Others were hospitalized.

A month earlier, a black uprising had occurred on the near north side. Most of 3rd Street was set ablaze, and gunfire was exchanged. There was one fatality. Brian Mouche, a childhood friend from my neighborhood and now a rookie cop of less than a year, was killed by a sniper's bullet. He was on duty at the time.

Few of the blacks living in my old neighborhood own their own homes. Landlords make little or no investment, except for the low purchase price, and the properties are consuming themselves. Every last drop of blood is being depleted from the neighborhood's soul. In time, the poor will be moved out, the few remaining buildings will be razed, and the rich soil will again be exposed and exploited.

So again I returned to Milwaukee and my old neighborhood to film. My daughter and I drove down 39th street. Little was recognizable. A group of young black kids stopped their street games, allowing us to pass, but not before banging on our car from all sides. The next morning we spent four hours filming there. The last shot was at my old grade school playground. Some black kids were playing basketball and I asked if I could film them. They reluctantly agreed, and I asked them to ignore the camera. I started to film and some older boys climbed a fence in the background and one of them yelled, "Motherfucker." The kids playing basketball stopped. One of them looked at me. Then a car entered the playground at a high rate of speed and circled the older boys, a few shots rang out. The younger kids huddled together under the basketball hoop. My daughter ran to our car and got it started. I finished the shot and ran to join her. We sped away.

In 2003 while filming *13 LAKES* I found myself in Northern Minnesota at the end of the peninsula that separates Upper Red Lake from Lower Red Lake, a quiet place at the end of a small gravel road which leads to the shore from the blacktop that ends there at the end of the peninsula. I had just finished filming. A thunderstorm blew across the lake from right to left. The late afternoon sun shone under the storm coloring the lapping water gold. The sky was near black. A number of pelicans flew from left to right. Songbirds sang anticipating the distant rain. There was little commercial development. It seemed like paradise.

A car entered the gravel road and blocked

me in. As two men got out of the car, I got into mine. They slowly walked over and knocked on my window, "Let's talk." I rolled down the window and could smell alcohol. I thought I was going to be robbed. They asked, "What are you doing here?"—"Why here?"—"Who do you think you are?" The same questions my films are trying to answer. They weren't robbers, it was political. Then one asked, "Are you going to write one of those fucking books?" For some reason I laughed. They just stared back. I was on their land, the Red Lake Chippewa Reservation. I told them I was there because of the wildlife. "Sure," the other said, "Did you know that most of the fish here had died due to your acid rain?" Eventually they let me go. Later while searching the internet I found:

Red Lake consistently resisted all attempts at allotment of their land, whenever they were able to do so, using formal rejections and informal methods such as running off surveyors, social workers, lawyers, missionaries ... The results of Red Lake's consistent, long-time strategy are best seen in comparing the land they have kept to the land other, more cooperative-with-whites tribes have lost.

In 2004, I returned to Milwaukee again, this time to remake *One Way Boogie Woogie*. The original *One Way Boogie Woogie* is made up of 60 one-minute shots. My first task was to locate the original 60 camera positions, and then find the people (old friends and family) whom appeared in the original. A few had died, my mother being one of them, and a few disappeared. Some had to be flown in from San Francisco and New York, some lived within a few hundred miles and drove back, and some had never left.

Fred Krause was one of those, he lived his whole life in Milwaukee. When I met him in the late 60s he was a longshoreman, working on the docks, Milwaukee being a part of the St. Lawrence Seaway. I remember him telling me about a day's work unloading cowhides covered with maggots, a fourteen hour job. He was a bear of a man, 6'4", 240 pounds, with long black hair and beard, an H.A. in appearance, but a genuine angel at heart. After he quit the docks, bartending, and a few other such jobs, he worked for many years helping Milwaukee gang youths reclaim their lives.

In 1977 I had him walk a small white dog through the frame from left to right, then off screen, he quickly ran behind the camera carrying the dog, and walked through the frame again, and then again, a third time (each time looking more sheepishly), while the camera ran continuously for 60 seconds; there isn't a cut.

Because of his speed, he re-enters the frame just a moment after he exits, one of the many silly jokes that *One Way Boogie Woogie* offers.

When I got to Milwaukee, Fred was one of the first people I found. He had shrunk a bit. His long black hair was now white and trimmed, and he no longer wore a beard. His kidneys were failing him and his heart was weak. I could feel his frailness. I told him about the film. We talked about humor. Together we decided to replace the small white dog with a large black horse, 18 hands high. We returned to 31st Street, still a one-way street. Fred walked the horse through the frame, then off screen, the handler ran the horse behind the camera readying it for Fred. Fred walked as quickly as he could, caught up with the horse, and walked it through again, and then a third time, as before. On this last pass the horse tried to eat some leaves and Fred struggled to keep the horse moving. For me it was a very touching moment. But this time, 27 years later, the shot took longer than 60 seconds, and I had to trim away the extra frames Fred needed to pass behind the camera.

Nine months later Fred Krause called me from his deathbed. We spoke for a short time. He said something about the horse, something about its hooves. His voice was weak and he laughed and then slipped away, somewhere else.

Sharon Lockhart

Milwaukee's Finest

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.
Schlemiel, schlemazl, hasenpfeffer incorporated.
We're gonna do it!
Give us any chance, we'll take it.
Read us any rule, we'll break it ...[1]

Roman Benning was a self-taught un-licensed architect. He worked at home, drank Schlitz beer, and drove a Ford. He spent his entire life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There were three bars on his block: Al Hill's, Rutson's Tap, and The Zebra. Rutson's Tap, the bar in the middle, was later sold and renamed The Center. Three to four afternoons a week Romie would go to Al Hill's for an hour or so to meet his friends.

Milwaukee, more than any other American city, was known for its beer. This specialty is the product of its large German community. In 1952 there were 57 breweries in the City of Milwaukee. Factory workers, ending their day at one of the many local bars, choose between two beers: Schlitz and Pabst Blue Ribbon. The more conservative workers drank Schlitz, ("The Beer that made Milwaukee Famous") brewed by the elite Uihlein Family; while the more pro-union workers drank Pabst, founded by Frederick Pabst, a German steamship captain. There was a similar division in their choice of automobiles. Schlitz drinkers chose Fords; Pabst drinkers drove Chevrolets. The choice of a Ford perhaps had to do with Henry Ford himself, the inventor of the assembly-line and one of the fathers of modern capitalism. Those longing for a more lucrative future looked to him as a model of success. That year Schlitz drinkers voted for Dwight D. Eisenhower while Pabst drinkers, being New Deal Democrats, voted for Adlai Stevenson.

James Benning, the youngest son of Roman, is a self-taught filmmaker. He drives a Ford. In 1955 at the age of thirteen, James would sneak out of his house on snowy evenings to shovel the sidewalks at the local bars. The people at Rutson's gave the biggest tips and during one of those nights James had his first taste of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

In the late 1970s Schlitz introduced high temperature fermentation in an attempt to speed up the brewing process, but it lead to an inferior tasting beer and Schlitz closed its doors in 1982. Pabst hung on for another decade but eventually shut down its Milwaukee plant in 1997. Though the two beers are still produced, their operations have shifted away from

1) Theme song from the television series *Laverne & Shirley*, an American television comedy that ran on ABC from 1976 to 1983. The title characters were roommates who, as the series began, worked in Milwaukee, Wisconsin at the imaginary Shotz brewery as bottlecappers.

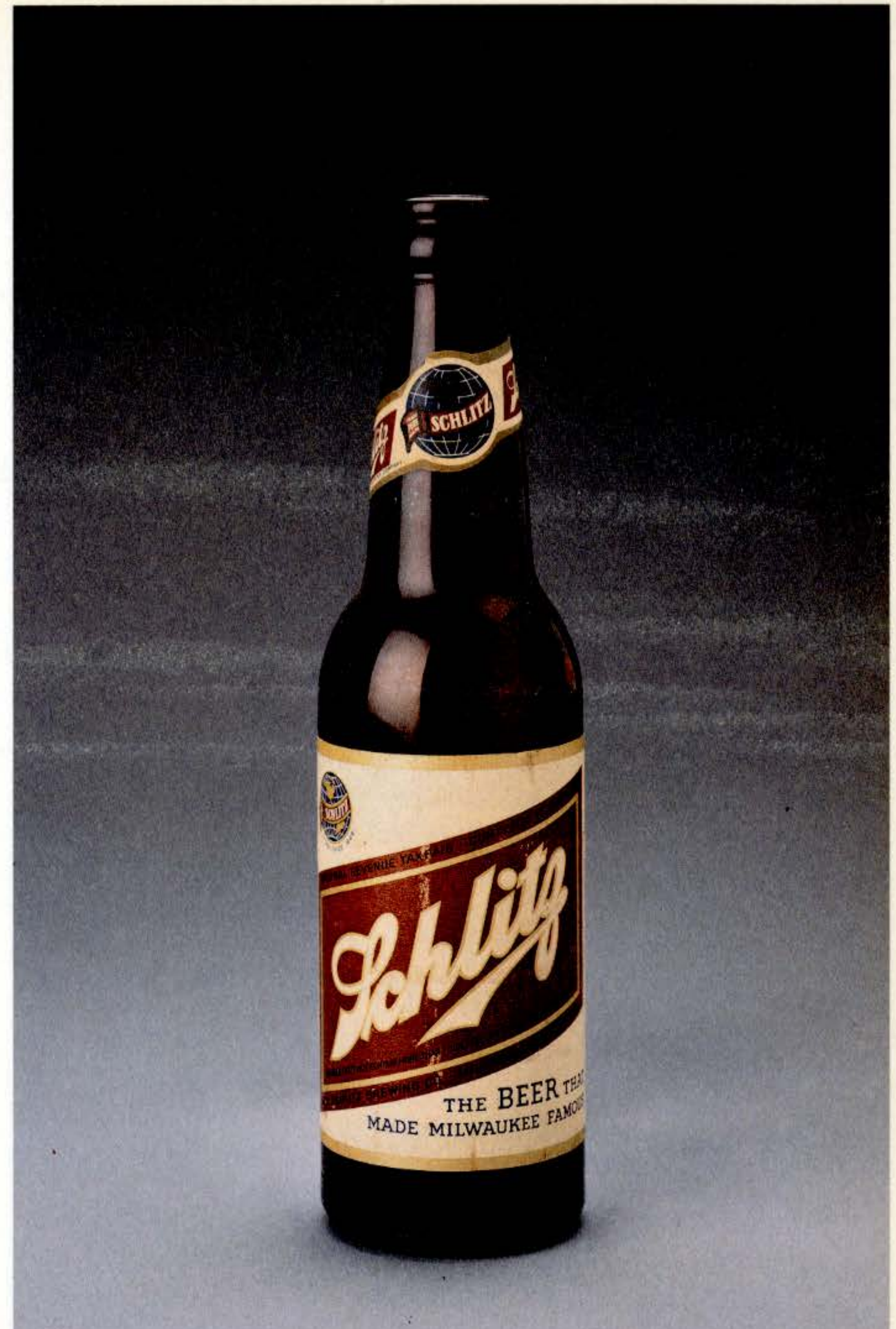
Milwaukee and the former breweries have been converted into luxury lofts. Of the 57 breweries from James Benning's past, only Miller remains in Milwaukee.

Based on a conversation with James Benning at The Country Girl Saloon in Castaic, California on May 16, 2007.

Following pages:

Sharon Lockhart, *Eight Samples from James Benning's Beer Bottle Collection: Schlitz, Leinenkugel's, Peoples, Pabst Blue Ribbon, Chief, Miller High Life, Point, Blatz* (2007)

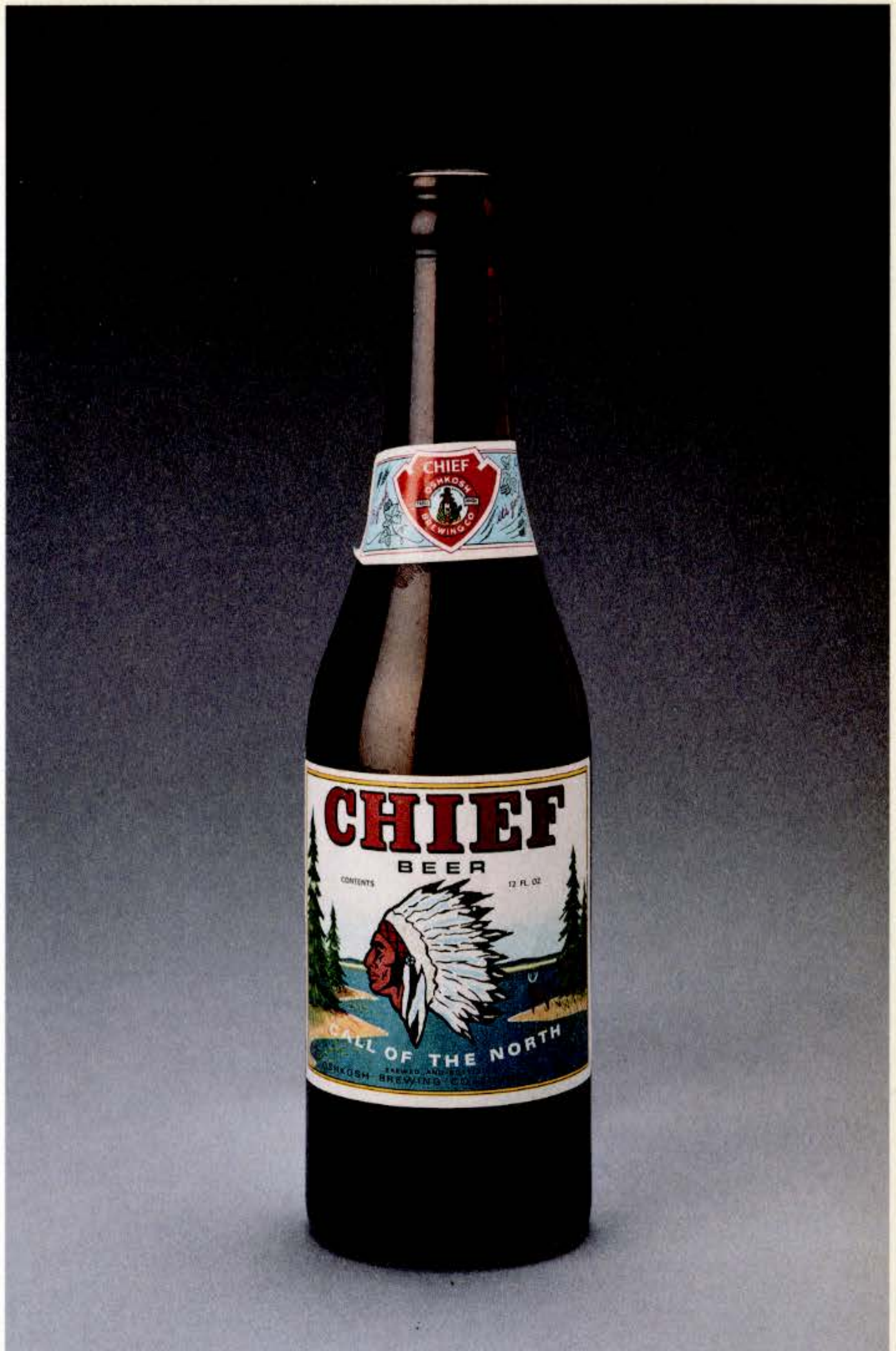
8 framed chromogenic prints
12 × 14 1/2 in. each
Edition of 6, 2 AP's



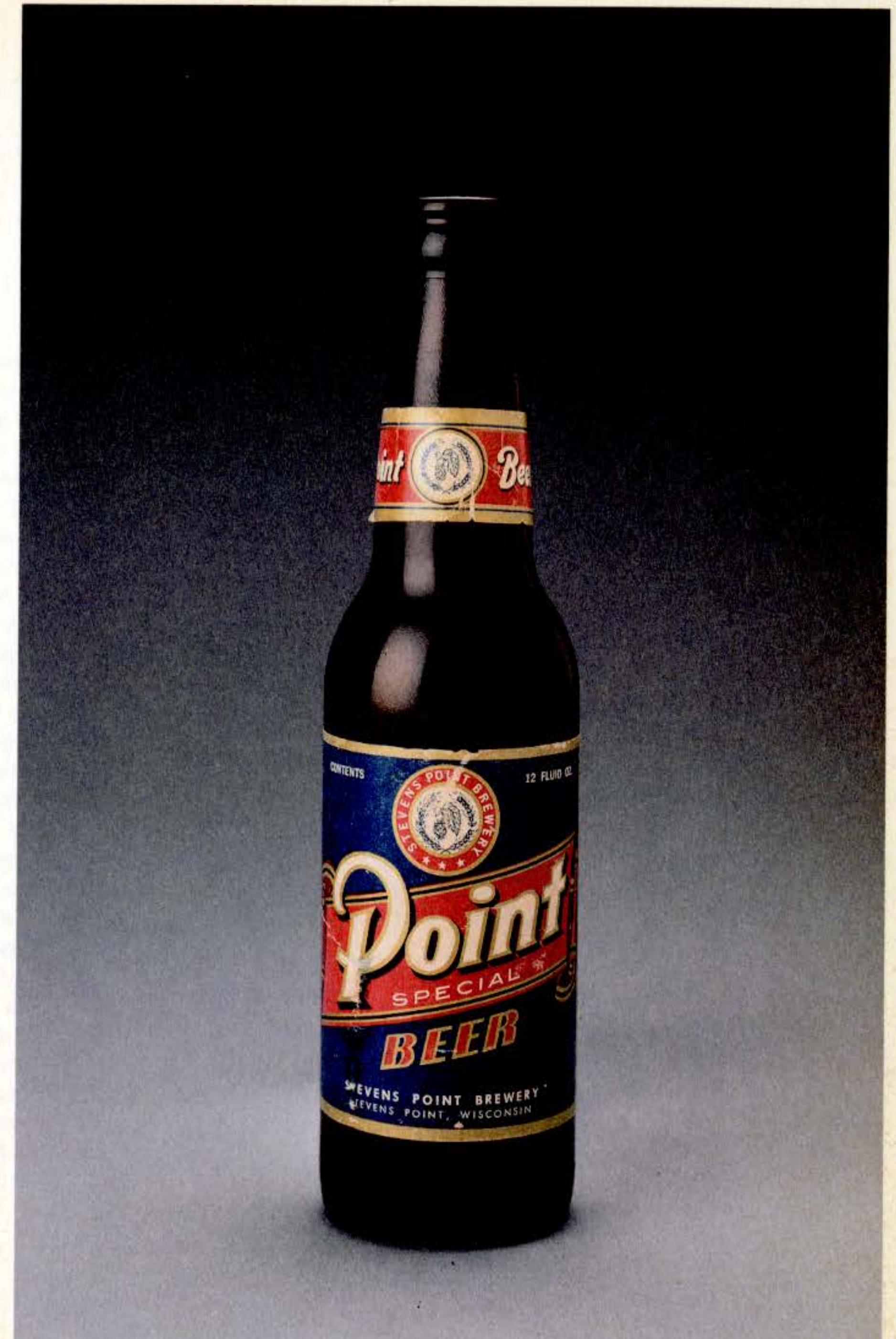

SINCE 1867
Leinenkugel's
CHIPPEWA PRIDE
Beer

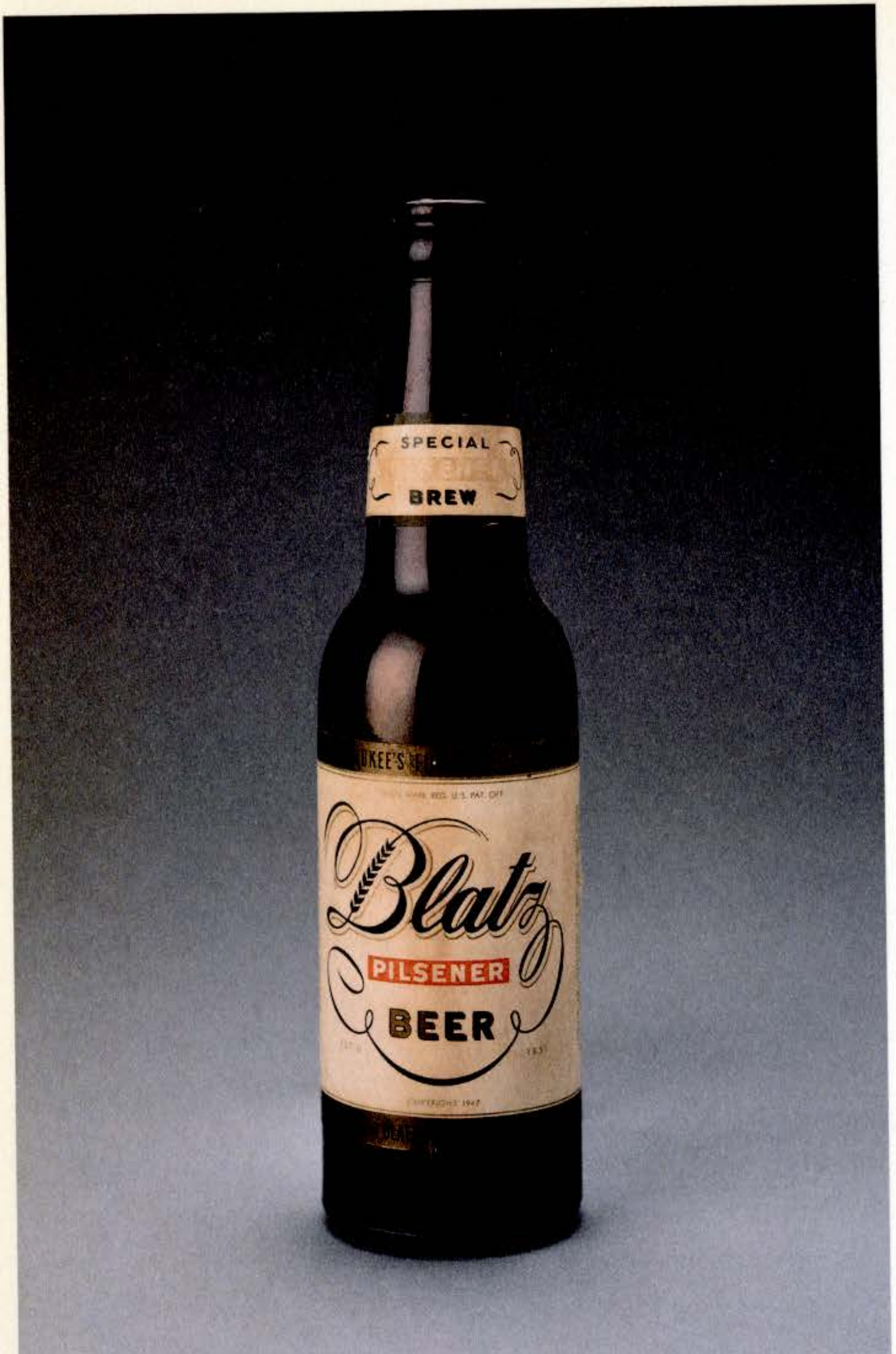

PEOPLES
Hits the Spot!
PEOPLES
BEER
BREWED AND BOTTLED BY
THE PEOPLES BREWING CO.
OSHKOSH, WIS.


PABST
MILWAUKEE
SPECIAL
PABST
BLUE RIBBON
BEER
MILWAUKEE, WIS. U.S.A.
PREMIER-PABST CORP.


CHIEF
CHIEF
BEER
CONTENTS
12 FL. OZ
CALL OF THE NORTH


HIGH
LIFE
HIGH LIFE
BEER
BREWED AND BOTTLED BY
BREWING CO. MILWAUKEE, WIS. U.S.A.


CONTENTS
12 FLUID OZ.
STEVENS POINT BREWERY
Point
SPECIAL
BEER
POINT BREWERY
POINT, WISCONSIN



Sadie Benning

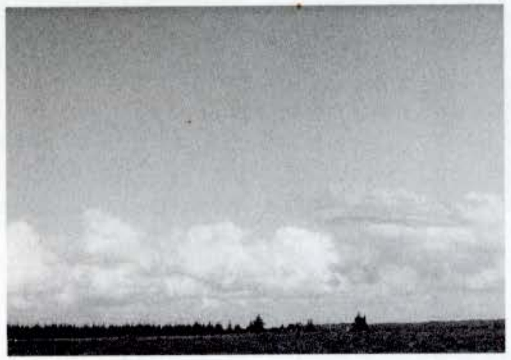
Walking and Talking

On a turn around trail, you hike in and then out on the same path.

The one thing I know about it is that perception depends on your perspective. What I like about looking is how many ways there are to see the same thing. Vision is totally abstract and being a witness to anything is variant to the moment, to your senses and your history. When I am with my dad we are usually either hiking, driving or headed to some kind of shrine, ruin, sculpture, or—alternate reality. I appreciate that especially, because fantasy is necessary to experience peace and imagination is a crucial tool for creating change or opposition—it's political. My dad is a math person, he is always trying to find a structural solution. For many years I didn't understand this. But now I do.

I remember being on a trail in Door County, Wisconsin—the one that went about a mile into our campsite, #8. My dad was trying to explain some kind of math equation to me. At the time it all made perfect sense—even though now I cannot actually remember the details. What I gathered though is a concept about time and space which is both flat and 3D at the same time, a kind of wrap around infinity.

I can't remember the details of the math problem because I was looking at the trees and spacing out into the bluish shine of the water and feeling the wind and the intermittent patterns of crazy light that flashed off the back of my dad's t-shirt in front of me—it said "Bakersfield" and it had two dolphins on it that were smiling and they were talking about how much they hated chlorine and that they were smarter than river dolphins because river dolphins can't see very well. But then I thought about this kid, who couldn't see but he could see through hearing how sounds bounced off the space around him. His lack of sight made him see environmentally, through sound's relationship with space. It's like when you close your eyes at night and you hear the occasional engine of a car very faintly and the sounds of insects and motion and in this soundscape your body isn't very large—It's not even a body—It's a consciousness. And this perception creates the ability to see—even with your eyes closed.



Sadie Benning, *Lac du Flambeau*
Double Sign (right)

James:

I remember wearing that T-shirt when we were having breakfast on Washington Island after the ferry ride. I remember saying it was weird to think of dolphins as a symbol for Bakersfield, it being 100 miles inland. And that math equation was projected geometry—where the complex number plane (flat) is re-projected back onto a globe (3D) and all the infinities both real and imaginary, negative and positive meet at the north pole. I am happy you recalled that moment.

Claudia Slanar

"I'll sneak in the back door."

Installations in the Art World: 1978–1985

In interviews around 1980, James Benning continually focuses on two aspects of his artistic work. On the one hand, he speaks of the economic difficulties posed by filmmaking: the rising costs of film stock and lab fees as well as the problems of sales and distribution. Like most independent filmmakers, during this period he doesn't live off his films but rather makes his way through teaching at universities and earning grants. On the other hand, Benning is preoccupied by his experience with 'another audience', namely visitors of art galleries and museums where his works are also being presented.[1]

Benning's self-doubt in regard to his progress as a filmmaker thus includes concern about placing his work in a larger, more specifically art-oriented context. This would simply lead to more exhibition possibilities and greater means for further productions, and is therefore to be seriously considered: "My fear is that this [*Grand Opera*, 1979] could be my last film (…) Maybe I'm ready to finish making films, though. I don't know. (…) I've been doing installations. They're more fun, they're quicker."[2]

His apparent frustration with an audience that searches his films for conventional narratives is combined with being frustrated by critics who categorize him as a mere epigone of structural film, instead of a filmmaker dedicated to developing an independent form.[3] Fellow filmmaker Jon Jost conjectures that Benning's artistic motivations target an art audience rather than a film audience,[4] which might seem accurate given the economy of attention and level of reflexivity his films require. Yet this notion ignores the fact that Benning actually conceives his films without regard to a particular audience. He addresses questions of structure, cognition and narrative form as universal issues. Nevertheless, he is always interested in how these ideas are treated in the discourse and discussions around his films.[5]

In 1977 Benning still thinks that New York City is the optimal place to find a larger audience: "If you can get shown in New York you generally can get shown anywhere."[6] He accurately describes a network of connections that can lead to the most desirable screening opportunities: from the New York Film Forum to the Whitney Museum of American Art; to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA); and above all, through the participating curators to further venues in Europe: from Rotterdam to the International Forum in Berlin in 1980.[7] A few years later he is "profoundly confused"[8] about his situation. He is insecure as to whether he feels more at home in the context of a museum audience or in the film scene, and whether he should continue teaching or live as a self-employed artist.

In a certain sense, Benning's work clearly eludes reception in an art or exhibition space. The complex relationship of sound and image as well as his concept of 'spherical space' makes the possibility of installation relatively absurd. His films follow a fixed, time-based dramaturgy. A quick stepping in and out of an exhibition space where one of his works is installed is hardly imaginable. At the same time, contemporary film installations, in particular, include the distancing of what is shown, self-reflexive modes of representation, and require the audience to fill in gaps of meaning. Benning precisely refers to this 'transfer problem' when he described his films as "installations for the cinema"[9] subsequent to a presentation of his next to last film, ***casting a glance*** (2007), at the documenta 12. It should be noted that the film was screened at a cinema. In 1978, however, he chooses a different form of presentation for *One Way Boogie Woogie* at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Benning exhibits preliminary studies in conjunction with the screening, including color prints made from slides that document the process of scouting a location and composing a shot. This conceptual exhibition strategy remains an isolated case.[10]

1) Benning participates in the documenta 6 in Kassel (1977) curated by Manfred Schneckenburger and the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1979, 1981). His films are shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1977), the MOMA in New York (1980), the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (1979), and the Tate Gallery in London (1983).

2) Peter Lehman/Stephen Hank, "11 × 14: An Interview with James Benning," *Wide Angle*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1981), p. 17.

3) See Jonathan Rosenbaum's critique of Benning's *Grand Opera* in particular, in Rosenbaum, *Film. The Front Line 1983* (Denver: Arden Press, 1983) pp. 56–58.

4) Jon Jost, "An interview with James Benning," *Frame Work*, no. 13 (August 1980), p. 29.

5) "I was invited to a film conference at the University in Milwaukee to show *Grand Opera* and there was a panel discussion. My frustration was that though they seemed to have the tools to analyze my film and though my film seemed to be the kind of film they'd be interested in analyzing, they weren't analyzing it. I wondered why I was invited." in: Scott MacDonald, "An interview with James Benning and Bette Gordon," *Afterimage*, vol. 9, no. 5 (December 1981), p. 16.

6) Lehman/Hank, "11 × 14," p. 17.

7) Ibid., pp. 17–18

8) Jost, "An interview with James Benning," p. 30.

9) Michael Althen, "Im ewigen Sog der Spirale," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Sep 20, 2007), p. 41.

10) In a review by Joyce Jesionowski the photographs as preliminary studies are mentioned but are subsequently pitted against the film: She sees the main achievement of the photographs for *One Way Boogie Woogie* as a shifting of attention to urban everyday scenarios and objects through their aesthetic foregrounding. Meanwhile the film's diverse mannerist gestures contribute to a blurring of this intention. See Joyce Jesionowski, "James Benning's *One Way Boogie Woogie* at the Whitney Museum, November 1978," *The Downtown Review*, vol. 1, no. 1 (New York, 1979), pp. 11–12

The biographical background provides a frame-work for the discussion of two installations by James Benning in which changes in status as well as in relation to audience (art vs. film) are legible.[11] Seen within an historical context, Benning's misgivings towards the art world and the established avant-garde cinema also provide an explanation for the fact that, in contrast to other artists with a similar focus, he is unable to find a footing in either New York's film scene or art scene despite the fact that the art market is booming at the time.

Benning conceives his first installation *Four Oil Wells* in 1978 for the Lewiston Artpark in upstate New York. The Artpark project is initiated in 1974 under the auspices of the New York State Parks and Recreation Commission. Fitting the spirit of the times, the project is focused upon participatory art production outside of traditional institutions and highlights artistic strategies that stress process and the ephemeral.[12] It includes an ambitious artist-in-residence program that addresses the public area of the park and its specific qualities as a natural environment. Dale McConathy, founder of the program, explains, "I wanted it to be as organic to the place as possible."[13] It is no wonder that Artpark's first season is dedicated to land artist Robert Smithson. 1978 is "the last season under the original format."[14] The current website of the still existent facility reveals Artpark's subsequent development: What began as an ambitious project integrating its social environment, has now become a commercial host of concerts and applied arts workshops intended for mass consumption.

Benning participates in the program shortly before its initial, experimental phase is superseded by increasing commercialization. The

11) I mention further projects only briefly given that Benning considers them of secondary importance and also because they would be nearly impossible to reconstruct from what remains on record. I also will not refer to the three installations that were not conceived as installations but rather were 'side products' of films. This concerns the more recent presentations of *One Way Boogie Woogie*, the 'California Trilogy' and *SKY* which are described in the appendix, p. 255.

12) "I hope to make a successful grass roots operation which is not like museums or galleries," Dale McConathy, the first Executive Director of Artpark, quoted in Rae Tyson: "Introduction," in Scelsa (ed.), *Artpark 1978*, catalogue (New York 1979), p. 5. Pictures from the catalogue show James Benning with a group of assistants during the construction and installation of his project – a rare sight given that he usually works alone. Rae Tyson stresses how the experience was unique for participating artists, given "unparalleled support systems to assist them, the social/communal framework that developed among the artists, the immediacy of audience feedback." These are conditions that are reflected in the discursive framework of the projects themselves. Ibid., p. 5.

13) Ibid., p. 5.

14) Ibid., p. 5.

first wave of land art and site-specific works are undertaken a few years prior. Robert Smithson's works are created up until 1973, Richard Serra's *shift* dates from 1972. Benning precisely addresses various ramifications presented by the site in his installation. He integrates issues of film, sculpture, cognition, landscape and public space. His notes are informative as to his various conceptual approaches: "[A]s the change in context, that is, film outdoors rather than in theatre; Oklahoma oilwells in former New York dump; daytime images existing at night (…), as sculpture, (…) as sound-sculpture (…), as spatial play."[15]

He builds four 16 × 20 feet wooden projection screens, constructed to fit the morphological particulars of their sloping site, which allows them to be seen from cars driving by on the Parkway. With the onset of darkness, film loops are projected showing four continuously pumping oil rigs in Oklahoma. They can be clearly distinguished from one another given particulars of light, weather and seasonal conditions.[16]

The proportional relationship of the oil drills is effected by the size of the projection surface and its varying proximity to the viewer. They shift from actual life-size dimensions to increasing monumentality, proceeding to pure abstraction when seen up close. On the last day of the installation, Benning has the dimensions of the screens painted in black on their surfaces in such a way that the numbers, 16 × 20, appear equal in size, again despite the varying proximity to the viewer. This proportionally inverts the sense of screen size. Benning hereby continues to play with categories of illusion and reality and a deception of the senses.

The visual motif itself is taken from an iconography of the Midwest that Benning established with *11 × 14*, *One Way Boogie Woogie* and *Grand Opera*. The oil pumps are part of an industrial landscape populated by billboards, gas stations and highways that dominate much of the rural landscape in the US. Biography flows into Benning's use of the oil drills, given that he taught at the University of Oklahoma from 1977–1978 (and again from 1979–1980). The drills onscreen look natural in the context of the park at twilight, but this impression changes with the onset of darkness. They are more clearly perceived as images shot in daylight once their frames stand in sharp contrast to the night sky. As in the seven-minute shot of a smokestack from *11 × 14*, the object is hereby released

15) Ibid., p. 17.

16) My descriptions derive from statements by Benning and his notes in the Artpark catalogue, given lack of further material documentation.

from all metaphorical or allegorical connotations. Its specific qualities as an object are stressed through the conditions of a reflexive and perhaps even contemplative form of recognition. Although minimalist sculpture works with a similar economy of attention and specificity, film installation includes a component of time that further alters the sense of the inside/outside space of an image. Levels of reflexivity transpire on different planes: There are the sculptural qualities of an everyday, mechanical construction, its depiction and representation; and then there is the interplay between the locations on film and experiencing the actual site of the film installation. The oil drills seen within the context of the park's landscape contribute another instance of irritation which is exposed as an illusion only upon second sight. In daylight the images combine with the actual landscape in a way that almost appears as a double exposure, thereby transforming one's sense of the actual space. The illusory space consists of further dualities: Oklahoma is superimposed upon New York; three-dimensional space as represented on film is projected upon the two-dimensional surface of the screen; the latter installed as an object in the landscape returning us to the three-dimensional reality of the installation. The site-specific nature of the installation consists in how it establishes its own space with its own rules, precisely in the sense of an "anti-environment."[17] The screens additionally allude to mainstream cinema: Movies are projected outside in the form of outdoor screenings as well as at drive-ins, the latter often found on the outskirts of cities—just like Artpark in Lewiston is also located outside of town.

In the following year, components of the Artpark installation are further developed within an institutional context. Benning realizes the installation *Oklahoma* (1979) for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. He again works with imagery of the oil drills, but this time projecting only two as film loops on two white screens hung against the facade of the Walker Art Center building. The same effect is achieved as at Artpark: The combination of the dark building and the onset of night further enhances the pictorial nature of the images and visually emancipates them from their support structures.[18]

17) Richard Serra, quoted in Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt/Main: edition suhrkamp, 2003), p. 262. In her book Rebentisch discusses contemporary installations in respect to their specific modes of aesthetic experience which seems especially interesting to me in considering Benning's films as 'installations for the cinema'.

18) See Melinda Ward's description in *Design Quarterly*, vol. 111/112 (1979), pp. 11–15.

This connection is reminiscent of another image of a projection surface from a Benning film: In *Sogobi* he shoots a billboard at sunrise in the middle of a desert. Off screen traffic noise seems to indicate that there is indeed an audience for the largely blank billboard marked only with the word "Available" and a telephone number. The filmic distancing of the object enables a contemplation of the thing in itself and combines with the tangible name of a firm called "Outdoor Systems." This text offers a more direct way of 'reading' the image, in consideration of economic realities—irrespective of the humorous pun it presents.

It is hardly surprising that Melinda Ward poses related questions in her review of *Oklahoma*, written in 1979, which echo those raised by Amy Taubin in her discussion of Project Artpark[19]: Do these projects raise a critique of capitalism, with symbols representing the pollution of the environment as the flipside of economic prosperity? Or do they depict the corruptibility of the art world? One could respond by answering 'yes' and 'no' and in a key observation Ward returns to this potential of visual recognition on the part of the viewer: "We know what it [the artwork] is, how it works and we also know about our own process of perceiving the work."[20] The oil drills are not robbed of their context, but the possibilities of an aesthetic experience nonetheless culminate in a self-reflexive moment of recognition which is open to various associations. Benning's filmic endeavors are hereby integrated: To understand the filmic image not as a direct representation of reality but instead as an "illusion of reality,"[21] as a "pattern of meaning"[22] that is subject to continuous transformation through the involvement of the viewer.

Benning undertakes two further film installations. Neither are ever documented. For *Double Yodel* (1981) he takes two 16mm loops of a cowboy and a Swiss person yodelling, and projects them on opposite sides of a swimming pool. *Last Dance* (1981) is presented at the Whitney Museum and continues the 'Oilwell Series'.

Benning pursues his passion for mathematics and units of measurement in 1985 with a computer installation entitled *Pascal's Lemma* that is presented in New York and Boston. It functions like a summary of his research on the number

19) Amy Taubin, "Review," *Soho Weekly News*, (August 24, 1978) p. 72

20) Ward, *Design Quarterly*, p. 15.

21) Jonathan Buchsbaum, "Canvassing the Midwest," *Millenium Film Journal*, nos. 7/8/9 (Fall/Winter, 1980–81), p. 225.

22) Lehman/Hank, "11 × 14," p. 20.

Pi which he had staged in various forms for *Grand Opera*. Here he references Hollis Frampton's *Zorn's Lemma* (1970), a film which included the transposition of an axiom, formulated by the mathematician Max Zorn, as applied to structures of speech for the purpose of creating meaning. Benning takes mathematician Blaise Pascal as his point of departure, interweaving his achievements in the field of projective geometry, probability theory and logic with biographical information. He specifically alludes to Pascal's religious delusions; however, *Pascal's Lemma* aspires beyond the presentation of an obsession. It engenders a conglomeration of reflections upon mathematical systems of order and their influence upon artists like Piet Mondrian, Frank Stella, as well as structural filmmakers (including Benning himself, one might add). It culminates in the devolution of the binary code and the computer as a 'new' medium. An overkill of information is thrown into the mix, including contemporary pictograms, news reports, and direct statements addressed to the audience: "You're manipulated!" The playfulness of the piece echoes early films by Benning in which he experimented with ideas and structure. In retrospect however, it presents a truly singular moment within the context of his body of work, which is further heightened by the fact that *Pascal's Lemma* can only be accessed on computer processors with a low CPU speed.

Translated by Eve Heller

Barbara Pichler

American Dreams, American Nightmares

Him and Me (1981) to *Used Innocence* (1988)

James Benning makes five films between 1981 and 1988. During these years he lives in New York City (1980–1987) and it is the first time in his life that he doesn't have to teach. Various stipends as well as the financial support of German television for *Him and Me* allow him to concentrate solely on filmmaking.

Him and Me (1981) marks the move from the Midwest to New York directly on film. The first shot shows an old car parked in front of a factory while a title locates us in Milwaukee, 1942—the time and place of Benning's birth. Then the camera pans to reveal the Manhattan skyline while a second title informs us that the time is 1980 and the place is New York. One camera movement bridges decades, arriving at Benning's place of residence at the time. The topography of New York permeates the plot, the actual place providing the fragmented narrative with an anchor. Benning visualizes New York with the same rigor that he had previously applied to the Midwest. He combines staged scenes with documentary shots in a manner that by now is characteristic of his work. The camera captures cityscapes, time and again in the form of very long takes that determine the mood of the film, such as a helicopter shot of Manhattan Island, the shot of a subway platform, its duration determined by the arrival and departure of a train; or other shots that capture everyday impressions of the city's streets. Sometimes it is almost as if the documentary gesture of the film is poised to replace the fragments of its staged narrative with stories that are implicit to these images, entirely supplanting any allusion to traditional forms of filmic narrative.

Benning constructs the film around the two main characters of Jean and Dan, their story unfolds in and between these cityscapes. As in prior films, he plays with story fragments and works with an accumulation of moments. The film concentrates on Jean who is seen in nearly every staged scene: Jean and Dan in conversation, Jean placing flowers in a planter shaped like a panther, Jean listening to the radio, painting her apartment, playing the violin, etc. Although the narrative seems more coherent than in his previous works, the 'big picture' only becomes clear in retrospect as revealed in the final scene. By divulging biographical information over the course of the film, the protagonists chronologically transport the viewer through time and space, ultimately landing us in the present moment. At one point, Benning repeats a stylistic device from *Grand Opera*: Jean tells her story off screen while circular pans document all the houses in which she has lived. The sequence consists of eleven shots beginning with Detroit

in 1956 and concluding with New York in 1980. The time and place of each location are identified by titles while songs of the period play quietly in the background. Jean talks about extremely personal moments that include sexual experiences, a miscarriage, and about meeting Dan in 1977, who has since died. In contrast, Dan's biographical retrospection is strewn throughout the film in the form of three fragments spanning from 1954 to 1980. Static shots of cityscapes accompanied by off screen sound replace the device of the circular pans. Dan is also heard off screen, talking about where he grew up, the decline of his neighborhood with the influx of blacks, fears and clichés prevalent on both sides of the racial divide, the influence of civil rights activist Father James Groppi, his own work in the Milwaukee ghetto, and how being beaten after taking part in a political demonstration had a profoundly politicizing impact upon him.

In a sense, both of the protagonists function as Benning's alter egos, yet there is an apparent division of labor specific to gender. While Dan lives out Benning's political biography and his involvement in social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Jean functions as an emotional outlet. Her character relives a tragedy that Benning himself experienced and she is the one who ultimately brings closure to the biographical fragments. In a long sequence on the telephone, she tells the story of how she coincidentally met up with Dan at a bar and brought him home one evening. In the middle of the night she woke up to find him lying dead beside her. Benning himself experienced such a trauma when he woke up to find a friend sleeping next to him had stopped breathing in her sleep. He explains how using the device of Jean's voice to narrate this story in the film allowed him an adequate distance from the trauma, enabling him to finally talk about the experience and process it: "I wanted to use my history, but not explore it. All my films are in some way autobiographical. *Him and Me* is a biography, but it's kind of twisted and turned. (…) I'm somewhat embarrassed actually about doing it in a public arena, trying to get over it so publicly. I don't know if I would want to do that anymore. It is selfish, because it was really helpful for me, but I don't think it's ethical anymore."[1]

While emotional references seem to be contained by the figure of Jean, the political refer-

1) James Benning in conversation with Barbara Pichler and Claudia Slanar. All direct quotations and references unless noted are taken from a series of interviews with the editors in California and Vienna in spring and autumn of 2006.

ences broached through Dan are developed beyond his personal biography. The second shot of *Him and Me* already allows for a political reading, when a man makes the following statement in front of the camera: "In 1942 the Smith Act made it a federal offense for anyone to advocate the violent overthrow of the government." In a kind of filmic performance, Benning edits the sentence so that it can only be understood haltingly and in repeating fragments. In the end, all that remains is an eerie echo: "the government, the government, the government …" The role of the state and its influence upon the life of the individual clearly concern Benning. Throughout the film he refers both to historical as well as contemporary political developments. In a sense, the historical moment that 'encodes' the entire film is the Iranian hostage crisis, an event which brands the presidency of Jimmy Carter. For instance, an off screen radio reports the 200th day of captivity of American citizens at the US embassy in Teheran and later broadcasts a report about the military's failed attempt to rescue them. In a sense *Him and Me* is entirely subordinated to this political event—recurring text inserts provide a countdown of the days the Americans are held hostage—day 196, day 200 … The larger social and political context of the world in which Jean and Dan live is indicated by such devices. Another political fiasco is referred to by the helicopter shot. It begins in a forested area as the word 'Vietnam' is superimposed, the island of Manhattan only gradually revealing itself. As in the first shot of the film, the use of text and camera movement (in this case the birds-eye-view of a helicopter, which additionally references a prevalent visual strategy of war reporting), infuses the image with the sense of a different time and place, and in this case a political action. An allusion to a crippled country is superimposed upon one that is intact through the use of a title, bringing together two distinct and remote spaces and contexts that exist in parallel.

This form of layering levels of meaning and understanding is a stylistic device that Benning continues to develop in subsequent films, culminating with *UTOPIA* (1998) where the picture and image tracks of two films are combined to create a new, and relatively asynchronous perceptual space.[2] The clearest examples of layering historical and political references are two sequences that can also be read as a kind of compressed media history. The first example

2) Regarding this element of 'layering' and intertextuality, see also Julie Ault's essay in this volume, pp. 88–116. Ault especially focuses on *Him and Me* (1981), *American Dreams* (1984) and *North on Evers* (1991)

involves a static shot: A room is seen with a calendar from 1954 hanging over an old radio and a window showing the montage of a smoke stack with traffic passing by. Most of the time only cartops are seen, but sometimes a passing truck obscures the 'view' out the window. The radio broadcasts a recording of the Army-McCarthy Hearings from the year 1954.[3] Benning recalls how he followed the hearings as a child and considers this moment to have given rise to his political awareness. Joseph Welch, head attorney for the US Army, is heard: "Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness. (…) Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency, Sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?"

This reference to Benning's political awakening is continued in a second sequence in reference to Father James Groppi, a white Catholic priest who fought for the civil rights of blacks. In yet another static shot, the radio has been replaced by television which had become the dominant medium by the 1960s. The television screen takes up the entire film screen, transmitting various interviews from 1967 in which Father Groppi speaks about the right to protest, the inhuman conditions of the slums and the resolve never to give up the good fight "until we get complete human dignity."

Benning selects moments from the social and political history of the United States directly connected to his personal biography, yet they speak for themselves as political references in the midst of the film. They are neither formulated by way of a continuous narrative thread nor are they attributed to one of the protagonists. Benning doesn't want to address politics too directly in his films. He had been involved in grass roots activism from 1967 to 1969, and has explained that if he had wanted to continue his active political engagement, he would have done so along those lines. After several years of working with poor communities in Colorado and Missouri, he had been exhausted and returned to the University of Wisconsin to continue his education,

3) In 1954, the US Army accused the Republican Senator of Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, of pressuring the Army to give preferential treatment to a former McCarthy aide. McCarthy claimed that the accusation was made in bad faith, in retaliation for his having recently conducted aggressive investigations of suspected Communists and security risks in the Army. A special committee was appointed to adjudicate these conflicting charges. The hearings opened on April 22, 1954 and were broadcast on radio and television. Many believe that they contributed significantly to McCarthy's subsequent decline in popularity. Based on an entry in Wikipedia for "Army-McCarthy Hearings," accessed in August of 2007, www.wikipedia.org.

pursuing an MFA as he says, '"to find his own identity,"—it seemed too simplistic to explicitly address his political interests by way of film. As a filmmaker he is less interested in agitatorial working methods and more concerned with aesthetic questions, although he defines his revolt against the dominance of mainstream cinema as a form of political resistance. Nonetheless, Benning's films are not depleted by purely aesthetic considerations. Political content, whether concrete or implicit, is always a pivotal aspect of his work. This is something he can't avoid as he admits, "There is that turmoil in my own life that I am not really addressing but I am alluding to. Do you ever disengage from politics? Sometimes my own politics get into my films, I am pretty dogmatic about what I believe, so I hope they don't come off as dogmatic how I feel about institutions and governments and the state of the world." He weaves political convictions into the fabric of his films' narration—fragments that indicate an interpretation of the history and politics of the US. However, these readings remain too singular and formally coded to be accused of dogmatism. Many of Benning's images lead back to questions of history and politics almost imperceptibly, without direct commentary. For instance, the camera drives by a row of houses which it captures in a long take that finally comes to a halt where Graffiti sprayed on a wall reads "Kill the Hostages." Or Benning shoots visitors at Liberty Island photographing each other posing for pictures in front of the Manhattan skyline. Political and social content is brought to bear in a latent or subliminal sense which is developed through the associative engagement of the audience.

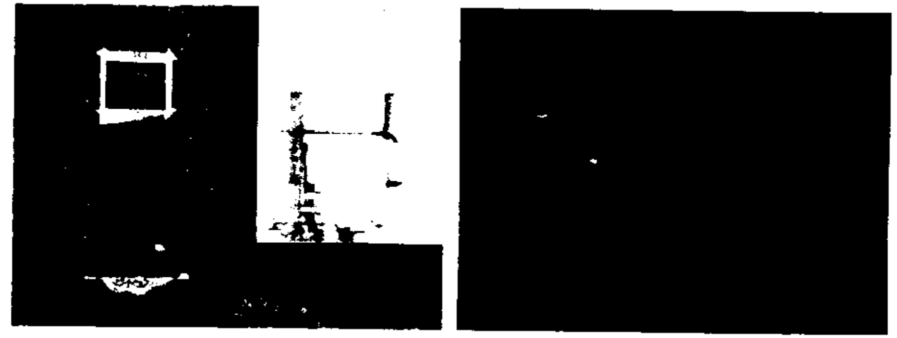
Although the cityscapes of New York in *Him and Me* are most memorable, Benning claims that it was extremely difficult to shoot in the city. While *Him and Me* was largely shot in and around his loft, *American Dreams (lost and found)* (1984) is entirely created there. It is the first in a series of 'text-image-films' in which the relationship between the components of image, sound and text reaches a formal peak. Benning creates *American Dreams* by concentrating on three elements, which he artfully weaves into a multifaceted narrative. The film consists of baseball memorabilia, a diaristic thread that is transmitted entirely through written text, and excerpts of radio broadcasts and music.

The film is structured in yearly chapters separated by black frames. The dominant visual element of the film are baseball cards and other

Hank Aaron memorabilia. The legendary baseball hero became homerun champion while playing for the Atlanta Braves. The film is divided into 23 segments. Each begins with a sequence of memorabilia viewed from the front and accompanied by a text insert that names its sponsor. These images are accompanied by radio broadcasts from the same year which are also annotated by text inserts. We hear advertisements, an interview with Elvis Presley talking about the supposed dangers of Rock'n'roll, and political speeches, among other things. The back view of each piece of memorabilia follows, proceeding in the same order as the original sequence of cards, while a song that Benning considers emblematic of that year is heard in its entirety. *American Dreams* commences with the year 1954. Baseball cards advertising Topps chewing gum #128 and Johnston Cookies #5 are accompanied by a recording of Joseph McCarthy during the Army-McCarthy Hearings on June 5, 1954, followed by the song "Cry" by Johnny Ray. The film concludes with the year 1976 and with shots of Topps Chewing Gum #550, Kentucky Fried Chicken (March of Dimes), Milwaukee Brewers Team Issue Pin, R. Laughlin Diamond Jubilee. Meanwhile, a speech by Dr. Helen Caldicott at the Symposium on the Nuclear Holocaust from December 28 is heard, followed by the Bee Gees singing "How Deep Is Your Love."

The third element of the film is a handwritten text, its white letters continuously scrolling along the bottom of the frame. It gradually becomes clear that these are diary entries written by a man who wants to assassinate a high-ranking politician—his target initially being Richard Nixon and later shifting to George Wallace. The diary chronicles his cross-country travel through the States in pursuit of assassination opportunities. It is only revealed at the very end of the film that Arthur Bremer is the author of the diaries, the son of a Milwaukee truck driver who shot and paralyzed Democratic presidential candidate Senator George Wallace in 1972. Benning precisely transcribes Bremer's notes according to the original diary, including its many spelling and grammatical mistakes. It is purposely kept unclear as to whether this chronicle is genuine or fictional or perhaps even autobiographical. Benning has described how agitating it was for him to sense the audience initially thinking that he was the author of the diaries. He was especially embarrassed by a favorite mistake, when Bremer describes his visit to a massage parlor where the girl lit "incest" instead of "incense."

American Dreams is an extraordinarily impressive and formally complex work that Benning



Him and Me (1981)

sees as an "homage to my own coming of age" and as an "intensely personal" film. It combines his love of baseball—he himself had considered a professional career in baseball and his long lived enthusiasm for the sport is conveyed by two fan cards marked with his name—with his interest in American history and politics as well as his fascination with popular culture. The latter is transmitted by Benning's memorabilia collection and above all, through his selection of radio broadcasts and songs. He constellates text, image and sound to create a layering of materials and models of reality, rendering different versions of the American dream. Hank Aaron's career is presented as a kind of scrapbook that chronicles the development of a sport talent through the manifestations of its capitalist marketing. However, a big part of Aaron's pictorial space is taken up with text, serving several purposes at once. On the one hand, the neutral typeface describes the memorabilia as well as the sound bites, conveying information about their origin and production date. On the other, the handwritten notation of Arthur Bremer's diaries conveys a mental landscape, thereby weaving an additional, seemingly autonomous thread into the film. Image and text confront two male biographies, which Scott MacDonald sees as an argument with the American Dream as well as with gender: "[A]s wonderful as Aaron's accomplishments were, their meaning is altered by the Bremer text. While Aaron's dream may be positive and Bremer's negative—they represent the polar opposites of American dreaming—Benning's juxtaposition brings out the parallels: both men seem involved in the same set of assumptions about how men demonstrate their worth as men." He continues that the "issue of gender seems very central in *American Dreams*, which offers a comment on a certain kind of macho engagement with the world" and that "all of these activities seem parallel instances of a particular male way of functioning in the world." Benning agrees that "this kind of maleness is causing problems."[4] MacDonald takes this argument so far as to describe *American Dreams* as an implicit "critique of the male dominated structural cinema."[5]

The visual space that Bremer and Aaron share is additionally encroached upon by the soundtrack. The succession of radio reports conveys a palpable sense of everyday life in America, transmitting an atmosphere and portraying the image of a country that is affected by

4) Scott MacDonald. *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) p. 222 and p. 243.

5) Ibid., p. 223.

violence down to its very core. This can be heard in the excerpt from the Army-McCarthy Hearings that opens the film: when Hank Aaron speaks of the unbelievable working conditions faced by black ballplayers (1958); when the difference between blind patriotism and a critical love of fatherland becomes evident in a debate between Nixon and Kennedy from 1960; when Father James Groppi talks about unacceptable living conditions in the inner cities (1966); when Malcom X is heard (1965) followed by Dr. Martin Luther King (1967). Meaning is also rendered through the way in which different elements combine, as when Martin Luther King says that the armed political struggle will not be successful while Arthur Bremer's scrolling text describes assassination as an effective form of protest. The music, on the other hand, makes *American Dreams* emotionally accessible and, as Benning says, at the same time functions as a "social parameter. These songs surface as the feeling of an era and really take you to those years."

American Dreams demands multiple screenings more than other films by James Benning because it is impossible to absorb all the information at once. There is a constant jumping back and forth between levels of narrative and layers of meaning. One has to divide one's attention and to decide what to focus on in order to integrate the various pieces of information offered by the film into an argument which is defined by each individual viewer. *American Dreams* is an extraordinarily captivating film. While demanding a fragmentation of attention it paradoxically instigates a far more multi-faceted reading of America than any one of its single narrative threads could have yielded.

Benning further develops strategies of working with various forms of documentation and levels of narrative in later films, but the film subsequent to *American Dreams* appears to be a side step. *O Panama* (1985) is his last short film, and the last collaboration he is to undertake up to this date. The screenplay is based on three short stories by Burt Barr, his co-director. *O Panama* doesn't tell a linear story but rather functions as the feverish fantasy of an ailing man, mixing the real and the imagined. The majority of scenes take place in the apartment of the film's sole protagonist, played by Willem Dafoe, whose illness binds him to his home. Another level of the story is introduced through short, surreal sequences via the imagination of the protagonist who envisions himself by a waterfall, dressed in a baseball uniform, singing the national anthem ... Once again, Benning deploys a familiar stylistic device, inserting black

frames between scenes to stress the autonomy of the images. The 'reality' of the external world is conveyed by a series of static shots anchoring the film in New York. In contrast to other films in which cityscapes develop a life of their own by virtue of their visual impact, *O Panama* seems to direct the gaze inwards, both in terms of the apartment's interior as well as the protagonist's inner life. Benning and Barr design the space down to the last detail. Light reflections playing off the wall are a prevalent element, shadows are cast by the Venetian blinds covering the windows. Meanwhile the soundtrack of the film expands space, both in terms of the actual diegetic space—traffic and television noise—as well as surreal territory—the chirping of crickets in the midst of a Mannhattan loft. Benning's graphic structuring of space in combination with diegetic and non-diegetic sources of sound is typical.The visual translation of the real in relation to the imagined in *O Panama* is reminiscent of an early work, *Time and a Half* (1972).

Benning himself appreciates *O Panama* for its craftsmanship and finds Dafoe's performance spectacular—jokingly referring to it as Dafoe's best film. It nonetheless seems foreign to the rest of Benning's work. It is his only film that depends on an entirely fictional point of departure. Although it repeats certain stylistic devices, he utilizes a narrative form that does not have the characteristic appeal of other films and despite narrative gaps and surreal moments, *O Panama* feels like a return to a more conventional filmic form.

Benning resumes his solitary way of working after *O Panama*. Although he has good memories of the project and really enjoyed collaborating with Burt Barr, the experience confirms his decision to work alone. "Collaboration is interesting, but difficult,"[6] he says, once again affirming his renunciation of traditional narrative cinema, a form which he finds too expensive, belabored, and over-directed. His subsequent films, *Landscape Suicide* (1986) and *Used Innocence* (1988), could be described as forays into the thriller genre that are related to *American Dreams* in terms of their combination of various visual and aural elements. After attempting to directly process the traumatic death of a friend in *Him and Me*, Benning retains an almost obsessive interest in acts of violence and death: "I got kind of freaked out about life and death. That got me involved in looking at these murder stories,

6) Ibid, p. 243.

because I thought it was the ultimate way to understand about death. Why would somebody kill somebody else?" *Landscape Suicide* combines two homicide cases that aroused spectacular headlines in their time. The film chronicles the seizure of serial killer Ed Gein after killing Bernice Worden in 1957 and the murder of cheerleader Kristin Costa by schoolmate Bernadette Protti in 1984. Benning explains that these stories had a deep resonance for him. While he had followed reports in the media about Gein as a teenager, his daughter Sadie came upon the Protti case when she stumbled on a title story in *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Benning renders the film in two sections, the two segments structurally mirroring one another. He charts the circumstances of each crime and the course of the investigation, conveying the psychic condition of the perpetrators as well as a sense of the communities in which the crimes took place. The center piece of both parts are re-enactments of the interrogations of Bernadette Protti and Ed Gein as conducted by police and federal agents. The dialogue is based on the actual transcripts of these interrogations. A medium close-up of the respondent in front of a blank wall is recorded by a static camera while questions are asked by officials off screen. Both interviews are uniquely chilling. Their lack of emotion and gesture and their performative character is disturbing and directs the attention both toward what is said and the psychological state of the perpetrator. Benning says that his "idea wasn't to dwell on violent acts, but to focus on how people look at themselves when they commit violent acts, and how they perceive what happened later."[7] The documentary background and the intensity of the actors add to the impressiveness of these scenes. Rhonda Bell as Bernadette Protti captivatingly portrays an insecure, lonesome and perhaps paranoid teenager who has no social circle to speak of; Elion Sacker as Ed Gein powerfully conveys a deeply disturbed psychology. Benning stages the scenes in a realistic manner that is distinct from his other films and blurs boundaries between fiction and reality.

The strangely detached inside view of the crimes as rendered by the perpetrators is supplemented by diverse external perspectives promented by police and autopsy reports, news items, photographs, voices from the community and a voice-over. The latter transmits additional facts as well as integrating the position of the filmmaker who is an outsider researching both cases

7) Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2. Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley University of California Press, 2002), p. 244.

Landscape Suicide (1986)

and reconstructing the progression of events. Once again, Benning entrusts this role to a woman who through her off screen voice brings autobiographical traces into the film.

All of the documentation is visually tied to the locations where the murders took place. Both sections of the film include a drive to the scene of the crime as well as a section of static shots that add a sense of location and landscape. Orinda, California is an affluent community consisting of well-groomed, one-family homes in a quiet and sterling environment. An emblematic image exemplifying this world opens the film with a woman tirelessly hitting tennis balls over a net—a shot that will later recur, though the tennis court will be empty. Plainfield, Wisconsin stands in contrast to the saturated green of California, presenting the cold whiteness of a snowy winter and a thinly populated area that feels frigid, empty and lonely. The emblematic image of this section is that of a man skinning a deer. Benning describes the mirroring of the two cases and their locations as a crucial touchstone: "I compared the isolation produced by the Middle Wisonsin winter, an isolation so severe that it can almost lead to madness, to the alienation felt in the pristine landscape of affluent California that caused that kid to become a killer."[8] His images pose a question as to what can be read in the topography of the landscape, without directly providing an answer. The voice-over remains silent in regard to this issue while Benning lets the material speak for itself. Gary Mairs describes how "the suburban streets and frozen farmlands are lent charged, implicit meaning by the material which surrounds them. Benning never makes the vulgar argument that place determines behaviour, but the implication that place shapes the peculiar patterns of deviant behaviour in ways that defy comprehension haunts the film. This attempt to derive meaning from landscape dominates the latter part of Benning's career."[9]

Landscape Suicide circles around the relationship between landscape and the violence that takes place in its midst. The voice-over narration conveys how Benning's interest in the perpetrators shifted to include the victims and the emotional state of their communities after visiting the actual places where they lived: "It's a funny thing about trying to tell the truth. When I began this story I felt the pain of Bernadette so heavily that I overlooked the victim. When I

8) Bérenice Reynaud, "James Benning. The Filmmaker as Haunted Landscape," *Film Comment*, vol. 32, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 1996), pp. 76–81, p. 78.

9) Gary Mairs, "Charged Symmetry. The Landscape Films of James Benning," in *argosfestival* catalogue (Brussels 2005), p. 122.

visited Orinda things became more real." The visit to Plainfield 28 years after the crime is described by the following words: "I couldn't get a sense of the murder, but the feeling of a collective guilt still lingers." Benning includes two narrative sequences in remembrance of the victims that present an exception to the overall structure of the film: Kirsten is on the phone with a friend while "Memories" from the musical *Cats* is heard on the soundtrack. The audience has already learned at another point that this was Kirsten's favorite song and was played at her funeral. In the second instance, Bernice Worden dances alone in her living room while the "Tennessee Waltz" (a tune hugely popular in the 1950s) plays on the radio. Both sections of the film close with a black and white photograph of the murder victims, accompanied by the years of their birth and death.

Landscape Suicide and *American Dreams* are by far the most impressive films that Benning made while in New York, "without question a perfect match of structural innovation and subject matter."[10] The mixture of documentary and narrative or staged elements creates a collage, simultaneously portraying a physical and mental landscape shaped by a violence that is never directly seen.

Benning makes one more film in pursuit of his preoccupation with life and death. *Used Innocence* (1988) employs the same guiding principle as *Landscape Suicide*, the processing of a crime. In 1982, former police-woman Lawrencia ("Laurie") Bembenek was found guilty of murdering her husband's ex-wife, based on circumstantial evidence. Benning stumbles upon the case in the newspapers. Fascinated by Bembenek's appearance and probably the fact that she too was a native of Milwaukee, he writes her a letter on June 1, 1986, expressing his interest in making a film about her. He reads the trial transcripts, works his way through hundreds of articles and starts to visit her in prison. He develops a screenplay based on his research, collaging materials that convey internal and external perspectives on the crime.

Like *Landscape Suicide*, the film develops intense moments that link crime to location. Benning describes what may be the most impressive scene in the film: "My favourite shot is of the house where the murder occurs. From off screen you hear the description of what happened that night, the narration is really full of activity but you see just the house itself." But *Used Innocence* is far more personal than *Landscape Suicide* because of the central role played by the letters that Benning exchanged with Laurie Bembenek

10) Ibid., p. 121

and which thread through the entire film. The letters are read off screen by Benning and Bembenek, revealing Laurie's perspective and her character as well as the process of making the film, thus affording direct insight also into the filmmaker's personality and condition at the time. Benning himself has expressed reservations about *Used Innocence* and today finds it to be too personal and perhaps transgressive. Whereas he is critical about some of his films but accepts them as stages in his development as a filmmaker, he is somewhat nervous about publicly showing *Used Innocence* and up till now, the film has only been screened a few times.

Despite aesthetic and structural similarities, *Used Innocence* never reaches the intensity of its predecessor. *Landscape Suicide* achieves a powerful impact through the distancing of the filmmaker, the story of the two murder cases and their relationship to landscape. In comparison, *Used Innocence* does not succeed in establishing as effective a focus. On the one hand, Benning gets close to and is fascinated by a woman he has described as "very complex: a self-taught Marxist/Feminist politically involved with prison reform, a hard core lifer, and at times, a naïve, southside Milwaukee Polish girl."[11] This personal relationship codes the film and while it does not compromise Bembenek's character, it is Benning—the person, not the filmmaker—who enters into the film as a distracting element. On the other hand, Benning is more concerned with diffuse questions about crime and punishment and how justice is served. He is not preoccupied with proving Bembenek's innocence, but rather with the pursuit of her case and, finally, a certain disillusionment with the system of justice. At the time this process leads him to the conclusion that "justice is arbitrary. It doesn't matter if you're guilty or not, if you have more money it is more likely you wont go to prison."

Throughout the 1980s Benning continued his in-depth examination of modes of narration and the layering of material. His ideas attain formal perfection with *Landscape Suicide* and *American Dreams*. But the fascination with death as well as the interest in working with actors and stories tied to at least a semblance of conventional narrative reach a conclusion now. *Used Innocence* constitutes the end point of an artistic (and personal) phase of development. From now on landscape and the stories with which it is inscribed will move into the foreground of his films, becoming the main actors in his subsequent body of work.

Translated by Eve Heller

11) Homepage Canyon Cinema, www.canyoncinema.com/B/Benning.html

Julie Ault

Using the Earth as a Map of Himself

The Personal Conceptualism of James Benning[1]

The first films I saw by James Benning were *El Valley Centro* (1999), *Los* (2000), and *Sogobi* (2001) which, taken together, are known as the 'California Trilogy'. Although I enjoyed watching them, they seemed fairly impersonal, not quite the match I imagined with the artist I had met on several occasions. A few months later, I saw *TEN SKIES* followed by *13 LAKES*, both from 2004. Within one year I had watched five of Benning's recent works, yet I had not seen any of those he made in the previous thirty. His earlier work is difficult to access since he prefers his films to be seen projected as film and does not transfer them to video or digital formats.

The films I saw consist of long, stable shots, ranging from two and a half minutes and lasting up to ten minutes in *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*. Their overt subject matter is place and landscape. Except for ambient sound, no information is provided until a list of the filmed locations appears after the final image.[2] Movement is barely perceptible in some of the shots. For instance, we watch a dormant nuclear power plant with no obvious action in *El Valley Centro*.[3] In others, action is more climactic: a cactus spotted hillside dramatically and continually changes from light to dark as clouds swiftly pass overhead in *Sogobi*.[4] Benning has explained his use of duration, "(...) the only way one can understand landscape is through time. Landscape is actually a function of time."[5] Duration is also employed "to give you time to think about the image while you're watching it (...) the way you think about the image will change over the course of its duration."[6]

Benning's recent films have an insistent pictorial perspective, the currency of which stems from simplicity and formal elegance. A horizon-

1) The phrase "using the earth as a map" derives from Lewis Carroll, who pointed out that as large-scale maps got more and more detailed and extensive, they would tend to blanket agriculture and rouse the protest of farmers. "So why not use the actual earth as a map of itself?" Quoted in Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964), p. 50.

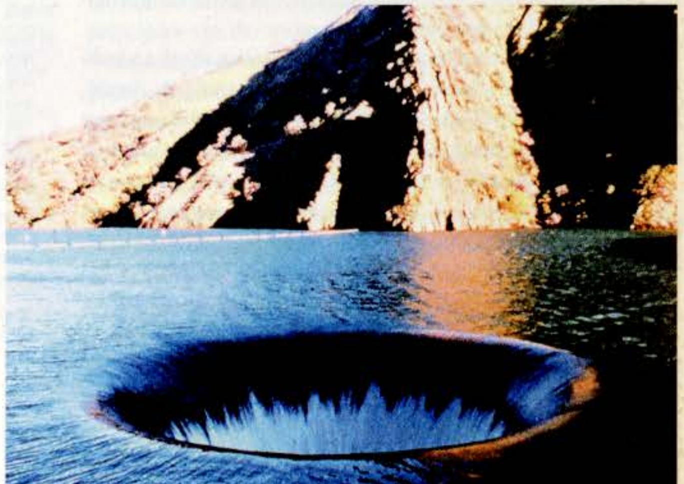
2) For each shot it is noted: what it is, ownership, and location.

3) Nuclear power plant (closed), Sacramento Municipal Utility District, Rancho Seco.

4) Hillside, Tejon Pass, Gorman.

5) James Benning quoted in Neil Young, "Circling James Benning: The 'California Trilogy' and Beyond," www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/index.php. Also, see James Benning, "Durch Null dividieren," in which he explains that while making *One Way Boogie Woogie* in 1977 he came to realize that landscape was very much a function of time—speaking about a stationary train car he was shooting on a bridge across the Menominee River: "The river was very still, you could hardly tell there was any movement in the water. To portray such stillness, I would have to take time. If I took a still photograph one wouldn't know just how still the river was." In Pichler/Pollach (eds.), *moving landscapes. Landschaft und Film* (Synema Publikationen: Vienna, 2006), p. 119.

6) D-L Alvarez, "Tortured Landscapes," *Filmmaker. The Magazine of Independent Film*, www.filmmakermagazine.com.



13 LAKES (2004, top), *El Valley Centro* (1999)

line motif runs through the 'California Trilogy' and *13 LAKES*. Each shot precisely frames centralized compositions, usually straight on. James Benning regards them as an "attempt to return to pure filmmaking, pure image making (…) but I know of course there's always the prejudice of the frame."[7] An equivalency between scenes results in the sense that the films and their maker are non-judgmental. They archive an apparently public discourse of images, using landscape as found object.[8] Danni Zuvela has written, "Benning's long takes become understandable as an authorial strategy for the organization of documentary materials and for interrogating the act of seeing."[9] This authorial program simultaneously possesses a distinct authority while making space for viewers to formulate their own sense of the places and situations portrayed.

The films are also visual journals of an individual's exploration and witnessing. In *Sogobi*, *13 LAKES*, and *TEN SKIES*, solitude and intimacy are particularly distilled. Their ambient quietude in tandem with minimal, exquisite images of wilderness, lakes, and sky heightened an awareness of Benning's off screen presence, confirming his statement that, "With *13 LAKES*, I become part of the narrative of the film."[10] While making that film he commented, "I gravitate more and more toward (…) experiencing things by myself and perhaps make films about it because I also think that there is something marvelous about (…) sharing it with somebody. But if I would be making these films with somebody else along I couldn't do it. I have to have that experience by myself to record it somehow—to actually see it."[11]

For me, watching these works primarily activated thoughts about the ways that conflicting, antagonistic agendas over land cultivation and commerce shape landscapes and configure social environments. The films stimulated viewing as concentrated drifting, and made for aesthetic and surprisingly emotive experiences. I realized that while initially they appeared to be cool, formal, perhaps even detached, they also bespeak

7) Ibid.

8) Bérénice Reynaud puts forward the idea of landscape as found object: "*Landscape Suicide* can thus be read as a direct forerunner for *Deseret*: both films are structured around a dialectic between landscapes and texts as 'found objects'—trial records or newspaper articles." Bérénice Reynaud, "James Benning. The Filmmaker as Haunted Landscape," *Film Comment*, vol. 32, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 1996), p. 78.

9) Danni Zuvela, "Talking About Seeing. A Conversation with James Benning," *senses of cinema*, www.sensesofcinema.com.

10) Benning presentation at CalArts, April 5, 2007.

11) Quoted in Reinhard Wulf's film, *James Benning. Circling the Image* (Germany 2003).

the inverse, demonstrating impassioned art-making. Ultimately, I even had the feeling of getting to know the person who made them, or an illusion thereof.

What continues to particularly interest me is how Benning's work embodies the joining of private and social realms. They embrace the personal and political in subtle and equal measure, and are difficult to classify. In this essay, through consideration of several emblematic films made between 1975 and the present, I aim to trace how Benning articulates personal perspective and represents public discourse while asserting their elemental reciprocity.

Image as Testimony

Benning dispensed with using textual components in his films after 1998, at least for the time being. Between 1978 and 1998, he investigated the interplay between image / sound / text. However, "After *UTOPIA*, I felt like I had exhausted my interest in text / image, and when I started the 'California Trilogy', I knew I wanted to completely discard text and work with just image and ambient sound."[12] He stopped using juxtaposition and layering which featured in much of his previous work—and ceased to provide overt narration or captioning. Relating nonetheless takes place. Individual vantage point is imbedded in his methods, structures, and aesthetic principles—in the images themselves.

Benning's method of distillation reveals his philosophy of art and his confidence in images. He has said on numerous occasions that a good artist is "someone that pays close attention and then reports back through their work."[13] 'Looking and Listening' is the essential method and theme of his recent films, and also provides their form. "Place is always a function of time so one has to sit and look and listen over a period of time to get the feel of that place and see how

12) Quoted in Scott MacDonald, "Exploring the New West. An Interview with James Benning," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3 (Spring 2005), p. 9. Although public speech as broadcast on radio has been absent in Benning's films since 1998, it is discreetly reintroduced in *RR* (2007). Composed of shots of trains, the length of each determined by how long it takes the train to pass, *RR* is readily grouped with Benning's image-driven films of this decade—the deviation being the inclusion of excerpted texts and broadcasts. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir is heard singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in the first shot. We listen to a baseball game (Noel Ryan pitching a no-hitter in 1992) in another scene along with a Karen Carpenter Coke ad from 1970, Gregory Peck reading from the Book of Revelations; Woody Guthrie singing "This Land is Your Land"; Eisenhower's 1961 farewell speech cautioning about the military industrial complex, and N.W.A.'s protest song "Fuck the Police." These audio fragments are overheard, apparently emanating from the off screen space of the respective shots, though in fact they are purposely curated and inserted by Benning.

13) Benning, "Durch Null dividieren," p. 200

that place can be represented."[14] A preoccupation with passing time likewise sets up viewers to engage in this form of 'looking and listening'. The close attention the films require subverts conventional rituals of watching a film and awakens viewers to patience.

. Images circulate as public discourse. Between 1978 and 1998, Benning incorporated forms of public speech including radio and TV broadcasts, reportage, and popular music into his films. With comparable declarative and expressive impact, his images communicate ideals, myths, histories, politics, criticism, ideas, and emotions—while recoding and recasting common pictorial vocabularies. Through location selection, artful composition, and precise sequencing, Benning exhibits a multifaceted visual philosophy, which challenges viewers to become visual thinkers.

Prior to beginning a film or selecting sites, Benning scouts a larger physical area of investigation and intensely researches its contexts for extended meanings. His vast and deep knowledge of the regions he explores informs the course and imagery of each film. He described *El Valley Centro,* for instance, as an endeavor to "map what I found out about the valley onto film."[15] In presentations and interviews he reveals extensive knowledge about his subject matter. A shot of the San Andreas Fault in *Sogobi* shows a highway in front of a rock face wall through which the road was built. Cars and trucks intermittently speed by in profile. "The Fault is revealed because the land has been violently cut through so cars don't have to climb a hill. They can go through it. The exposed fault line looks very angry, very tortured. It's a tortured landscape, both in reality and as metaphor (...) the Central Valley was completely transformed from something that was wild, with many marshes and lots of wildlife, into a more manageable place. Now, only five percent of the land remains as it was a hundred years ago. A number of large lakes have disappeared; all the rivers that fed the valley are now dammed and feed two irrigation systems, built with state and federal money. The lake bottoms are now irrigated; corporate farms having something like a thousand feet of topsoil. The farms are very efficient; however, irrigated farming has a history of increasing salt levels, and it renders land useless somewhere down the road."[16]

Landscapes speak. Histories of human agency and aggression leave consequences on

14) James Benning quoted in Wulf, *Circling the Image.*

15) Benning presentation at CalArts, April 5, 2007.

16) James Benning quoted in Alvarez, "Tortured Landscapes."

The United States of America (1975)

place. Benning's images often focus on these signs, with minimal mediation. "For all of the shots in *13 LAKES* I continually tried to find subtle locations that would describe the uniqueness of each lake."[17] The shot of Lake Powell shows the recent drop in water level registered on the canyon walls to reveal that the lake is man-made. Benning lets viewers make narration, formulate opinions, and experience "the essence of an image (...) outside of narrative terms."[18] This method of judicious withholding encourages viewers to contemplate the reasons behind the fact of each image. Benning believes the compilation of social histories brought to bear at any given location as well as his personal process and intention end up in his imagery, if not explicitly then as discernable presence. "[I] do think that unconsciously all the work that goes into making an image somehow ends up in that image. That might be a bold statement, and I *don't* think an audience could tell you the exact facts—it's a subtle feeling." [19]

Interactions of Private and Public

Benning has never withheld that his motivations are overarchingly individual. It is a truism that all art is personal to some degree, whether transparent or obscured. But Benning's work enacts personal dimension on a fundamental level: "After completing *North on Evers* (1991) I decided I would only need two criteria to keep making work. One, make films that would take me to places where I wanted to be. And two, make work that would put my life in a larger context. Both somewhat selfish reasons, but very workable."[20]

Benning's minimal works of the last few years established for me that with elegant economy and the utmost utility his art contains extensive personal and social signification of equivalent narrative voice. But I wondered how he got to this place, and what came before.

In his key films from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, personal speech and consciousness are expressed through storytelling that frequently

17) Correspondence with the author, April 2006.

18) James Benning quoted in Wulf: "Duration brings narrative to my films (...) but I'm hoping that people even get beyond that. Maybe there is an essence to an image that's isn't even about narrative—it's about what it is outside of narrative terms."

19) James Benning quoted in MacDonald, "Exploring the New West," p. 12.

20) James Benning, *Off Screen Space/Somewhere Else,* in this volume, p. 49.

draws on journals and diaries—private chronological records of experiences, feelings, and observations that express "individuality of writing (...) and the traces of a period."[21] Public discourse gets articulated through media broadcasts of political speeches, artifacts, reportage, and popular songs. How do these layers of private and public speech interact? How is the personal/social dynamic enacted? With what intentions? With what methods?

Radio figured into his films since he made *The United States of America* with Bette Gordon in 1975, a condensation of their drive across country from the interior of a car. Starting in New York and ending at California's coast, for twenty-seven minutes we see an assemblage of diverse American landscapes through the windshield. The film's constant is the windshield as frame while place, weather conditions, light, time of day, and their clothes change throughout. They drive day and night, on back roads, turnpikes, busy city streets, and open roads, stopping only to let a train pass, for a bite, for the night, for a quick glimpse at the Grand Canyon, and at their final destination—the Pacific. Except for one shot in Death Valley the radio is always playing: "We used the radio to develop stories: recurring songs tie scenes together. There's a whole thread about the Vietnam War ending: as we get closer to the West Coast, the Viet Cong get closer to Saigon."[22] We hear scraps of newscasts, ball games, preaching, and songs by Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan, and Phoebe Snow among others. Minnie Ripperton's "Loving You" repeats three times, registering the annoying quality of radio playlists.

The United States of America simultaneously casts views into the personal space of the car and through the car outward to its public surroundings. The film posits the semi-private car interior as a receptive vehicle for publicity, and as a lens on the world. Here the experience of driving parallels watching television's continual stream of information in search of visual and narrative stimulation. *The United States of America* is an entertaining and witty cultural critique, and it encompasses and predicts some of Benning's ongoing themes: travel and journey, landscape, time, broadcast, and the dynamics between private and public.

21) Roland Barthes "Deliberation," in Susan Sontag (ed.), *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), p. 481.

22) Benning quoted in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 227–228.

The Telling of Selves: *Him and Me*

Him and Me (1981) quickly establishes that Benning's life has determined the film's scope. The film opens with a shot of a 1942 Hudson parked in front of an old factory over which Benning's birthplace and birthdate, "Milwaukee 1942," are superimposed. With a seamless sleight of hand, the camera then pans left, ending at the Manhattan skyline, captioned "New York 1980," his residence at the time.

Several streams of information unfold and interflow throughout the film. Temporal structure is defined by shots that vary from a few seconds to over ten minutes. Two scenes involving Wisconsin political leaders anchor a layer of political speech. While seeing an old-fashioned radio on a side table near a window with a double smokestack outside and trucks speeding by, we hear an extended segment of the Army-McCarthy Hearings. An excerpt from June 9, 1954 includes the dramatic climax of Army Counsel Joseph Welch exposing Senator McCarthy as irresponsible and bullying in his attempts to brand Welch's colleague, Fred Fisher, as a communist. Welch's admonishment of McCarthy is heartfelt: "Until this moment I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness". Benning recalls seeing the hearings on television in a crowded luncheonette he visited with his parents when he was eleven.[23] Several scenes later, we see a tightly framed television screen broadcasting a compilation of rousing speeches and compelling interview segments by Milwaukee's Father James Groppi, the Catholic priest and social activist who led local civil rights struggles and helped catalyze Benning's critical consciousness about racial politics. Groppi discusses "homes unfit for human inhabitation" and "so-called riots," including the civil rights protest on August 28, 1967 in Kosciuszko Park, where Benning was beaten unconscious by racist counter demonstrators. In these lengthy emotional scenes political speech infiltrates domestic space, and audio and television take center stage as transmission methods.

New York as locational context forms another recurrent theme. We see New York iconography, including a row of colorful gated storefronts; two lanes of rush hour traffic entering the Holland tunnel; an extended shot of a pickup truck driving over the bridge to Brooklyn as viewed from the truck's flatbed through the windshield (recalling *The United States of America*); Coney Island; the IRT subway; and the Statue of Liberty. A shot of an empty street in the Wall Street district is captioned "Phnom

23) In conversation with the author, December 2006.

Him and Me (1981)

Penh 1970," and a nearly ten-minute scene from a helicopter flying from Central Park to Wall Street is captioned "Vietnam" for the first few seconds.[24] These superimpositions symbolically link the American economy with the Vietnam War and imprint one place upon the other—a method Benning will continue to employ.

Conversational fragments between primary characters, Jean and Dan, and their individual remembrances of formative moments compose a personal layer running throughout the film. The stories are admixtures of Benning's own stories, and aspects of his life are symbolized via both Jean and Dan. Diverse incidents and monologues intersperse: a distracted looking Jean paints her walls pink and green; Jean despondently lies on a couch listening to a fight she hears through the wall; a soap opera fragment is overheard; the Raybeats perform a song; Jean poses for pin-up-style photos. Interior shots take place in Benning's lower Manhattan loft where he resided between 1980 and 1987.

A significant sequence representing all the places where Jean lived consists of eleven shots, each starting with a house followed by a 360-degree pan circling the neighborhood and returning to the same house where it began.[25] The shots are accompanied by snatches from songs that evoke the periods of residency, along with her anecdotal narration.[26] The audio coupling of diaristic musings and familiar songs effectively shows how personal and social memory intertwine. Jean ruminates about her first sexual encounter, her father's habits, about moving to the country and finding a dying cow with a stillborn calf in her womb, and finishes by saying, "When I lived on the farm I got pregnant but lost the baby in the third month; I wanted a child badly. I still do. I can't believe Danny is dead."[27]

24) James Benning, *Fifty Years to Life. Texts from Eight Films by James Benning.* (Madison: Two Parts Press, 2000). This book contains complete scripts for the following films discussed in this essay: *Him and Me, American Dreams, North on Evers, Four Corners,* and *UTOPIA*. Helicopter rides are referenced in the script for *American Dreams*, Bremer writes, "For $16 I took a helicopter to Wall Street (...)." p. 31. In the script of *Him and Me* Jean says, "Oh, also right after the police let me go I went for a walk along the Hudson and this helicopter flew over. So I took a helicopter ride and flew over Manhattan." p. 25.

25) Detroit 1956, Milwaukee 1957, Detroit 1958, Milwaukee 1961, Chicago 1963, St. Louis 1965, Springfield, Missouri 1969, Galena, Missouri 1974, Horicon, Wisconsin 1976, Detroit 1977, New York 1980

26) Including Gene Vincent's "Be Bop a Lula," the Supreme's "Baby Love," "Blue Moon" by Elvis Presley, "96 Tears" by ? & the Mysterians, and "Mystery Dance" by Elvis Costello.

27) Benning, *Fifty Years to Life*, p. 17

We learn Dan is from Milwaukee. Dan matter-of-factly talks about living in one house for eighteen years and describes the Milwaukee neighborhood he grew up in, including its racial makeup. He talks about his political awakening during the Civil Rights Movement. He says that in 1972, he "began to get interested in music. By 1975 I was experimenting with sound. I really like what I'm doing, but sometimes I feel like I'm hiding."[28] Concurrently Benning got interested in film and began experimenting with images. I point out the connection between narrative elements and his lived experience because self-referentiality is a compelling dimension of Benning's work over the course of his career.

Numbers from 196 to 220 appear on screen periodically, indicating the mounting days that American hostages had been held in captivity by Iranian students at the American embassy in Tehran. The Iran hostage crisis marked the American political climate throughout 1980, ultimately influencing the defeat of Jimmy Carter by Ronald Reagan. It also marks a personal milestone for Benning.

The final scene shows Jean in her kitchen absorbed in a long phone call in which she talks about the recent death of Dan. They had been in bed together when she woke up to an eerie stillness and found he had died in the night. She expressively imparts the details, discusses the event, the days preceding and after, providing context for her emotional state of mind. Her monologue retrospectively contextualizes many previous scenes.

Jean's story mirrors the life experience of the artist, who woke up on November 4, 1979, the day American hostages were taken in Iran, to find the friend he was in bed with had stopped breathing. That experience profoundly affected him. He said recently, "The genders being switched in *Him and Me* was necessary at the time to give me some distance but not to hide."[29] Jean: "Shit it's changed my life. All my priorities are confused. But I guess I'm not afraid now. It was peaceful. I guess I'm much more aware (...) I feel guilty about what I learned (...). But the only way you can face death is by someone dying. So what I learned was at the expense of Dan. And I feel real weird about that."[30]

Benning uses film as a means to share self-reflective processes of thought. *Him and Me* does not have a tight structure like many of his later films or like *One Way Boogie Woogie* made four years earlier. It is an idiosyncratic association of

28) Ibid., p. 22.

29) Correspondence with the author, January 2007.

30) Benning, *Fifty Years to Life*, p. 25.

ideas and fragments, alternating between interior and exterior shots of disparate length, both staged and documentary. In some ways, *Him and Me* seems anti-narrative. The film becomes coherent as we take in "the telling of selves,"[31] with Benning as both receiver and switching station for the input and output of information and filmic methods. *Him and Me* is a diagram of consciousness in which memory, private and public speech, personal and public histories, stumble into each other, while evading linear order and containment, and seeking exposure.

Individual as Metaphor: *American Dreams*

A couple years later Benning refined the interlocking of private and public speech into a highly effective form with *American Dreams* (1984), perhaps more competently upon leaving the autobiographical in favor of a metaphorical analysis of models of masculinity and public participation in the context of American media culture. In it he extended his use of blending personal and social narratives, superimposition, montage, cross-referencing, and self-referentiality.

American Dreams is vigilantly structured with objectively treated close-up shots of baseball cards and memorabilia that venerate Henry (Hank) Aaron, who played for the Milwaukee Braves the majority of his career. The cards promote the ballplayer with his images, vital statistics, batting record, and career trivia while also advertising Topps Chewing Gum, Armour Franks, Hires Root Beer, Junket desserts, and Salada Tea. There's even a Hank Aaron church fan. The comprehensive baseball card collection is shown chronologically and methodically, demonstrating the completist sensibility of a devoted fan and registering the relentless commodification of Aaron. The material begins in 1954, charts his career—which lasted till 1976, and backtracks to end in 1974 when he attains his goal of 715 home runs, breaking the all-time record held by Babe Ruth. As a black player in the major league that until 1946 had banned blacks, his triumph is a correction to institutionalized racism.

Two of the filmed cards bear the signature of James Benning: one commemorating 500 home runs, dated 7/14/68, and his membership card in the Hank Aaron 715 club. A baseball enthusiast who pitched in high school and college as well as in Milwaukee's semi-pro industrial league, Benning began collecting the cards, "because Sadie [his daughter] (about 10 at the time) was a big sports collector; she'd go to the local hotel in

31) This term comes from Adam Phillips, "The Telling of Selves. Notes on Psychoanalysis and Autobiography," in *On Flirtation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 65–75.

Milwaukee to get autographs of visiting players, so I took her to some baseball card conventions; and I bought a few old Milwaukee Braves cards; then I started to collect only Aaron because I liked him as a kid."[32]

The Aaron-related image layer running throughout the film is paired with the hand written diary of fellow Milwaukee resident and would-be assassin Arthur Bremer, begging to be read as it moves from right to left at the bottom of the screen, reminiscent of emergency warnings and news bulletins that punctuated TV broadcasts in the 1960s.[33] The handwriting, which accompanies images of the memorabilia, is Benning's. He transcribed the diary in his own hand, including its original spelling mistakes. Beginning on April 4, 1972, Bremer's diary traces his travels from Milwaukee to New York and back, on to Canada, and to Washington —movements which we learn were determined by Nixon's whereabouts as he tracks the president with intent to assassinate. It ends May 15, 1972, when, after failing to assassinate Nixon, he shoots George Wallace instead.

The diary format draws us in. Bremer's is the only raw, unmediated voice in the film, making empathy and identification inevitable. In contrast to Aaron, who is represented one-dimensionally, we get the sense of a personal consciousness through Bremer's journal as he narrates his journey, his state of mind, his sexual fantasies and adventures, and his self-recrimination about failing to get Nixon. Political insights render him all the more sympathetic. "You know America doesn't have to be imperialistic. She allready owns the free world by reason of economics. We save our military for those areas not under our economic control. But what bothers me is why do the factory owners—the rich—support all of our wars? Guess the rich get richer and the poor get shot. I go crazy with delight when I hear Jhonny [sic!] Cash's new record—I shot you with my .38 and now I'm doing time. Milwaukee weather is shit. Called off a ball game for rain."[34]

Juxtaposed temporalities—the dual dramas of Bremer's mounting anxiety to get Nixon, and Aaron's relentless pursuit of home runs—intertwine and undercut one another, and finally climax in Bremer shooting Wallace and Aaron hitting his 715th home run. The apparent hero/villain construction disperses quickly as their ambitions are contextualized by one another's, and by the competition-driven American Cold

32) Correspondence with the author, February 2007.

33) See the published diary: Arthur H. Bremer, *An Assassin's Diary* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, Harper & Row, 1972). *American Dreams* contains excerpts.

34) Benning, *Fifty Years to Life*, p. 49.

War culture evoked in the film by political speeches heard as we see the fronts of the baseball cards, and excerpts from popular songs of the period playing when we see their backs. The music is eclectic, suggestive of tuning into different radio frequencies.[35] Familiar songs locate the viewer in terms of collective memory and invite personal associations with the music and the period it evokes. Some are chosen because they resonate for Benning (i.e. "Come Go With Me" by the Del Vikings) and others because they are cultural reference points, such as Frank Sinatra's "High Hopes," a song used in the Kennedy/Nixon election.

The selection of political speeches is likewise motivated. Benning recalls that his belief in govenmental truth was ruptured when he heard NBC National News broadcast that on May 1, 1960 a US spy plane was shot down over Russia: Washington authorities denied having sent the plane while admitting in the same breath that the incident probably happened. We hear an on-the-spot news announcer reporting on Kennedy's motorcade in Dallas on November 22, 1963, just as chaos breaks out after the shooting; Malcolm X speaking on nonviolence, "It is criminal to teach a man not to defend himself, when he is the constant victim of brutal attacks;" Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking on "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government;" Father Groppi speaking on the unlivable conditions blacks are confronted with; President Nixon upon winning reelection; and Patricia Hearst on her commitment to the Symbionese Liberation Army. The variety of voices provides a fragmentary, connect-the-dots configuration, which induces the polarized political climate of the articulated period. Benning's editorial role in selecting, sequencing, and presenting the material makes for incisive social commentary.

The potential for cross-connecting the information presented is rich and to some degree up to viewers, according to their own lived experience and historical awareness. Benning exploits the call and response between materials poignantly (for instance when Bremer remarks on racial inequality) and ironically (for example as Brenda Lee's "I'm Sorry" speaks to Adlai Stevenson's emphatic denial of Kennedy's aggression towards Cuba in 1961—the Bay of Pigs debacle). Song lyrics frequently pick up on speeches that were just heard and also juxtapose with Bremer's words. For example he berates himself, "Just another FAILURE," as Nixon slips by him: "I had a good view as he went past me, past me again, the 6th time and still alive."[36] This gets combined with Neil Armstrong's victorious communiqué from the Apollo Eleven moon landing on July 20, 1969, directly followed by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young performing "Woodstock."

Just as mounting numbers appeared occasionally in *Him and Me*, they similarly develop in *American Dreams*, indicating the tally of Aaron's home run accumulation, and contributing to the atmosphere of countdown urgency that infiltrates the film. The rhythm at which the materials are pictured along with the driving diary and the forceful impact of excerpted speeches and songs makes for a dynamic information structure.

American Dreams is a riveting intertextual work that evokes an era and an environment. While political, personal, and public layers of information alternate in *Him and Me*, in *American Dreams* private and public speech are vocabularies of the same cinematic space and temporality, seamlessly fused. The interplay between the diaristic, which candidly lays bare its writer's internal formation, and the rhetorical strategies of public speaking and reportage, is made central in *American Dreams*. The individuated narratives of Aaron and Bremer are both framed by the same historical conjuncture of American culture invoked by the broadcasts—economically stratified, competitive, masculinist, polarized, imperialist, and violent. Benning's editorial orchestration of the interfaces between ideals, promotions, disinformation, and individual commentary—which he constructs exclusively through found objects—artfully shows how the public sphere and the individual mind coproduce one another.

American Dreams is also a dialogue of compulsions involving Benning's obsessive artistic methods as well as Aaron's and Bremer's quests. The names of James Benning and Arthur Bremer as authors of the film and the diary are superimposed at the film's end. Bérénice Reynaud insightfully noted that, "Bremer's solitary travels (Wisconsin, New York, Canada, Michigan, Maryland) in search of the perfect opportunity to shoot a man—not unlike Benning's own lonely travels throughout America, in search of the perfect image to shoot—draw an imaginary map across the continent."[37]

35) including, "Cry," Johnny Ray; "Dungaree Doll," Eddie Fisher; "Rock with Me Henry," Etta James; "Fever," Peggy Lee, "La Bamba," Richie Valens; "Misty," Johnny Mathis; "Crazy Arms," Patsy Cline; "Red Roses For a Blue Lady," Wayne Newton; "The Ballad of the Green Berets," SSGT. Barry Sadler, "Leopard-skin Pill-box Hat," Bob Dylan; "Suspicious Minds," Elvis Presley; "Candy Man," Sammy Davis Jr., "Love to Love You Baby," Donna Summer, and "How Deep is Your Love," Bee Gees.

36) Benning, *Fifty Years to Life*, p. 45.

37) Reynaud, "The Filmmaker as Haunted Landscape," p. 78.

Journey and Journal: *North on Evers*

In 1989, Benning took a motorcycle journey across the United States that started from his home in Val Verde, California —"(...) running away from fears and towards desire."[38] Nine months later, he wrote a text recounting the trip which adapted from a letter he had written to a friend upon his return.[39] In 1990, he retraced his previous route—filming along the way—looking for the places and people he encountered the year before. The resulting images are combined with his handwritten text—which appears as Bremer's did in *American Dreams* moving from right to left at the bottom of the frame—to make *North on Evers* (1991).

Through image and text, *North on Evers* traces two cross-country journeys at once. The atmosphere of transience is convincingly conveyed by the use of a hand-held camera. The imagery combines footage—brief shots like snapshots as well as longer ones—of rural and backwater landscapes, landmarks, portraits of friends, and Benning's signature inclusion of cows, oil wells, desert vistas, working class environs, old buildings, and abandoned cars. Sound is ambient and includes the occasional radio transmission and song.

Benning's writing narrates a freewheeling atmosphere of adventure and contains historical information about the places he visited as well as stories about meeting strangers and visiting old friends. He describes the ephemeral—dramatic weather, personal ailments, sexual fantasies—and records observations about the landscapes he passes through. His tone is explanatory and personable with moments of revelation. As he approaches New York—a destination which marks halfway the point of his trip—an account of the film is woven in: "The ride to New York was painful. My lower back gave out, and the road out of Washington was full of holes. I could feel every bump. I was in dire pain. Yet I just kept riding. A year later I made this same trip again. I searched for the same people and places. I had a purpose. I looked both outside and in. I filmed landscapes and portraits. I recorded sounds. But this time I just drifted. Running from a storm or toward some desire. Perhaps in a desperate attempt to outdistance my anxiety or deny the murmur of advancing age."[40]

Distinct from the present-tense urgency of Bremer's journal, Benning's storytelling highlights retrospection and layers of memory. Periodically, history that is deeper than the history of the trip is imparted, as reminiscences occur to him along the way.

38) James Benning quoted in Wulf, *Circling the Image*.

39) Benning presentation at CalArts, March 8, 2007.

40) Benning, *Fifty Years to Life*, pp. 151-152.

The written journal sets the tempo to which the images keep time, although with a twofold disjuncture. Temporal disjuncture is central in *North on Evers*: as we read Benning's recollection we anticipate correlating imagery, and then within the range of a few seconds to a few minutes of reading about a situation, we see the places and people invoked by the text—only the representations are from the following year. The delay between reading and seeing is both a few minutes and a whole year. *North on Evers* is perpetually "out of time"—ahead and behind simultaneously—drawing a parallel to interior mental formations such as imagination, in which tense is not a stable parameter.

The interweaving of personal and social histories, of private destinations—friends in Albuquerque, Austin, Dallas, New York; Mose Tolliver's house; his mother and his daughter in Milwaukee; a woman he is attracted to in Pittsfield—and public landmarks—both predictable and peripheral—Monument Valley, Graceland, US Steel, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, Hoover Dam, the Spiral Jetty—is seamless in *North on Evers*. Scott MacDonald aptly noted, "Benning has never quite recovered from the sixties and from the knot of political events and aesthetic issues that came to dominate the decade: especially the struggle for racial equality, integration, and political-economic power and the small-scale and large-scale violence (including, of course, the Vietnam War) that was transforming the American social landscape of those years. *North on Evers* is full of obvious and subtle references to these events."[41]

Benning considers journey to be "a way to put things both in political and social perspective."[42] Benning's trip is filtered through defining historical moments, such as the 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers, field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Evers was the first prominent civil rights leader to be murdered, and his death prompted President Kennedy to solicit a comprehensive civil rights bill from Congress, later signed into law by President Johnson. Benning visited Fayette, Mississippi, looking for the place where Evers was shot, and upon realizing he mixed up his history, goes on to Jackson. "I drove to Jackson and went to a public library to

41) Scott MacDonald, "Re-envisioning the American West," in Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 100.

42) Quoted in Young.

find where Medgar Evers had lived. One of the main streets had since been named after him. I took it north to find his house. I stood out in front all alone. There was a purple bedspread hanging in the front window to act as a curtain. After a few minutes a young boy on a bicycle passed by and looked at me as if I were somewhere I shouldn't be. It started to rain and I followed a small road east into Alabama."[43]

North on Evers is particularly significant for how the themes of time and memory are taken up both as private processes—in the form of Benning's journeys—and as artistic process—in the form of the film as representation. *North on Evers* links to the ways in which chronicle plays a primary role in his earlier films invested in pictorial/textual symbiosis, and points to Benning's developing consciousness about time, history, permanence, and ephemerality. The film indirectly ushers in the notion of duration he will explore extensively through landscapes of the West and Southwest beginning a few years later with *Deseret* (1995).

These films, as diverse as they are, allude to the abstract ways that collective culture and history produce individual consciousness and agency. The field of public events that is referenced specifically delimits those situations that affected the artist.

Perhaps the key difference between Benning's earlier work and his imagistic films of the past several years, which employ duration for structure, is how interpretation is proportioned between filmmaker and viewer. Although it is up to viewers to follow the course and make sense of and meaning from *Him and Me*, *American Dreams*, and *North on Evers*, narrative components signpost the way. In the durational films Benning guides us to a particular spot at a specific time of day and year, and then stands there adding nothing. It is enough that he has found the place, deemed it significant, brought us there to look, stirred our senses, and set our minds adrift.

Notions of time and landscape are extended in Benning's latest film, *casting a glance* (2007), a close meditation on Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* consisting of seventy-eight one-minute shots filmed during sixteen trips made there between May 15, 2005 and January 14, 2007. Dates expressed textually, ranging from April 30, 1970 to May 15, 2007 are interspersed with images to highlight the parallel between water levels during Benning's period of shooting and the Jetty's lifespan in relation to the shifting level of the Great Salt Lake, which is responsible for its alternating exposure and concealment. Smithson's

43) Benning, *Fifty Years to Life*, p. 149

North on Evers (1991)

Jetty is an emblematic place for Benning, which has appeared in previous films.[44] "I'm always in the habit of going back to places that I've filmed at to see if they've changed and what they're like and if I'm going to use them again, and to reexperience it. (…) To know that this place has changed over time in such a way, not only the five minutes that you were there but the next five minutes that you're there two years later or the next two days you spend there five years later (…) to have some kind of continuous view of this place."[45]

The *Spiral Jetty* comes to mind primarily through objectifying aerial images that picture it basking in sunshine, usually above water. Until its reemergence in 2002, the Jetty was primarily publicized through photography as staid landscape and static art object. From myriad vantage points, under vastly changing conditions, during different seasons, Benning's cinematic study contradicts the Jetty's unwitting role as art object and representationally restores its vulnerability and its variety. "The Jetty is a barometer for both daily and yearly cycles. From morning to night its allusive, shifting appearance (radical or subtle) may be the result of a passing weather system or simply the changing angle of the sun. The yearly seasonal shifts and changes in water level affect the growing salt crystals, the amount of algae in the water, and the presence of wildlife. The water may appear blue, red, purple, green, brown, silver, or gold."[46] While rehabilitating the Jetty in this way, *casting a glance* expresses the filmmaker's twin philosophies of 'looking and listening' and 'landscape as a function of time'.

Mirror, Method, and Memory

The painter Edward Hopper once said, "The nucleus around which the artist's intellect builds his work is himself (…) and this changes little from birth to death. The only real influence I've ever had was myself."[47] This resonates with Benning who commented, "When I'm asked who my influences are, I always tend to say, 'Well, there are certain filmic influences from the seventies', but basically what influences me most is the film that I made just before the film

44) *North on Evers* and *Deseret*.

45) Quoted in Wulf, *Circling the Image*.

46) Benning, "Off Screen Space/Somewhere Else," in this volume, p. 49.

47) Edward Hopper quoted in James Hillman, *The Soul's Code* (New York: Warner Books, 1996), p. xii.

that I'm working on now."[48] These notions may seem myopic but such an arrangement can also be regarded as a rich feedback system in which passions and methods echo productively, generating artistic route and singular sensibility.[49]

This feedback system produces continuity and ample cross-referencing within James Benning's films. We encounter persistent iconography such as groups of cows, passing trains, emitting smokestacks, farmland being plowed, billboards, gunshots, oil wells, highways, the Spiral Jetty, and the Milwaukee neighborhood where Benning was born and raised. When I finally had the opportunity to see *11 × 14* (1976), I was surprised to find a cluster of his concepts and emblematic images from the Trilogy present in a film made twenty-four years earlier.

Particular accounts from Benning's life persist in his work. Some are humorous anecdotes, such as unknowingly ringing the doorbell during a sexual encounter with a Milwaukee woman on her front porch when saying goodnight, and her mother coming to the door. Other stories are more poignant and include him coming upon a cow with a stillborn calf inside of her, and a Sunday morning spent drinking with his unconventional and inspiring neighbors from across the tracks, May and Cliff. Some stories first appear in his 1973 poetry book *Thirty Years to Life*, suggesting the importance of poetic forms and writing (scripts, letters, journals) in his work since early

48) "When I made *North on Evers* I drove through Utah, and was interested in what I saw there, so the next film, *Deseret*, was made in Utah, and then, because of what I learned and saw while making *Deseret*, I became interested in the Four Corners area, which is partly in Utah, and made *Four Corners*. *UTOPIA*, too, was about the West, but it was a California film. *El Valley Centro* grew directly out of *UTOPIA*. And when I finished *El Valley Centro* I needed an urban companion to the rural, and made *Los*. So the films just keep growing out of one another. You can trace my films from *11 × 14* all the way up through the Trilogy. In fact, the Trilogy references *11 × 14*, where I also used many shots with just image and ambient sound." Quoted in MacDonald, "Exploring the New West," p. 9.

49) James Benning quoted in Wulf, *Circling the Image*: "If I'm influenced by anybody it's Robert Smithson and the way he worked in the landscape and the way he passionately talks about the environment he works in." Benning's filmic influences from the seventies include Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow, and Yvonne Rainer. In recent years Benning has been copying paintings by artists including Bill Traylor, Henry Darger, Jesse Howard, Nellie Mae Rowe, Black Hawk, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Howard Finster, Joseph Yoakum, and Mose Tolliver. Speaking about this private aspect of practice in "Durch Null dividieren," p. 206, he writes, "I've been learning to paint (…) by copying paintings that I really like, paintings by American folk artists. Most of them are from the South; most are black, a few white, and one Lakota Indian. I am very proud of their work, not of my paintings, but of theirs. But it's not really about learning to paint. What I'm really learning is how different artists think. And about obsession. In order to copy I have to understand how each artist works, and this has helped me to better understand myself. It has informed the way I looked in the last few years." In correspondence with the author, February 2007: "I starting doing this to relax and I didn't know at the time I would learn so much about framing."

on.[50] Several are narrated in *Grand Opera* (1979), *Him and Me*, and *North on Evers*. These repetitions indicate that his interest in relating is motivated by content as well as by the formal charge of telling a story. Particular situations, memories, and histories are incorporated in Benning's viewpoint and preserved in his work using a repertoire of methods for registering the past. Invoking narrative and locational reference points shows how they function for and in him, as elements in the configuration of consciousness.

The most significant and frequently articulated account is that of the Milwaukee neighborhood where Benning was born and grew up—how that predominantly German immigrant neighborhood came to be, and how it changed over his lifetime. He talks about the prejudice against and fear of blacks he was taught at an early age, and how the black population increased and eventually moved into his previously white neighborhood. He recounts his own process of racial consciousness and politicization during Milwaukee's civil rights struggles and Father Groppi's inspiring words and activism. This description of personal, geographic, and social transformation becomes open in its use and appears in *Grand Opera*, *Him and Me*, *Four Corners*, and frequently in Benning's self-representation.

Four Corners, Benning's most obsessively structured film, discloses histories and views of the intersecting states of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona. It is divided into four proportionate sections with precisely the same format. Each segment begins with eighty seconds of rolling text using 1,214 letters each. These are brief biographies Benning wrote about four artists—Claude Monet, Mose Tolliver, Yukuwa, and Jasper Johns.[51] The biographies situate the

50) James Benning, *Thirty Years to Life* (Madison, WI: Two Pants Press, 1973).

51) Benning, *Fifty Years to Life*, p. 193, p. 197, p. 201, pp. 205–206. Yukuwa is an imaginary Native American woman artist Benning portrays to accompany the image of the Horseshoe Canyon Pictographs. "Yukuwa was born in A.D. 142, along the San Juan River near Butler Wash, as the sun rose the morning of the summer solstice. She was the second child of five, and the only one to live past a year. Her father died when she was thirteen, but he had already witnessed her great strength. She lived with the extended family of her mother, twelve people at the time, now eleven. They were hunters and gatherers moving with the wildlife from Rainbow to Grand Gulch to Barrier, each year making a circle like the sun. Sometimes going as north as Nine Mile Canyon, other times as far south as Red Rock. She gave birth to her first child at fourteen, then another two years later. Both her children were healthy and strong. From her great-grandfather she was taught to mix native ores and mineral clays with seed oils, blood, and egg white. Then by further thinning with plant juices, water, and urine, she learned the secret. On her nineteenth birthday she achieved the holy right to mark the canyon walls. In the spring of A.D. 168 she fasted for nine days. Upon hallucinating, she mixed a pigment the color of dried blood, and using brushes made of animal hair and yucca spines, she painted what she saw." p. 201

artists in place and time and recount geographic movements, marriages, and births. They end with the naming of one of their artworks. During the static shots of the artworks, histories about ethnic and cultural conflicts, disappearing communities in the region—stories of exploitation—are told, each with 1,186 words.[52] These are followed by thirteen forty-second scenes of locations and areas mentioned in those narrations, shot respectively in summer, fall, winter, and spring.

In the second section, the static shot of Mose Tolliver's painting *George Washington*,[53] is juxtaposed with Benning's spoken description of his Milwaukee neighborhood and intends "to place my life in a larger historical context."[54] His story is actually an armature to articulate stories of interlacing constituencies whose histories generated Milwaukee. The Milwaukee narrative told via fragments in earlier films is extended in *Four Corners* to "develop these larger histories of land ownership or land use, and how the native peoples who were there were systematically removed."[55] In so doing, Benning highlights the cyclical quality of conflicts over land use and the transformation of the land, which is reiterated in other sections of the film.

Benning's lived experience of Milwaukee is integral to his understanding of place as an aggregate of histories and thus is prerequisite for making such an investigative analysis as *Four Corners*. His self-inclusion into the otherwise southwest-focused framework demonstrates the degree to which witnessing processes of displacement and disenfranchisement in his original neighborhood, and participating in its transformation, educated him and imprinted his psyche. Milwaukee as matrix is essential to Benning's way of seeing and has incalculable influence on his work—as story, location, memory, history, imagery, and metaphor.

Benning has grafted specific time and place onto other times and places in order to establish symbolic interconnection and propose geographic and temporal conflations, including Vietnam with Manhattan in *Him and Me;* Che Guevara's struggle in Bolivia with California's Imperial Valley near the Mexican border in *UTOPIA*; and Milwaukee with Farmington, New Mexico in *Four Corners*. These interpenetrating associations attest to the fact that no singular or

52) Ibid., pp. 193–196, pp. 198–200, pp. 202–205, pp. 206–209.

53) Benning visited Mose Tolliver, a painter he likes a lot, a couple of times, and bought one of his paintings for his daughter Sadie, on one trip, which he mentions in *North on Evers*, 1991. Tolliver died in 2006.

54) MacDonald, "Exploring the New West," p. 9.

55) James Benning quoted in Alvarez, "Tortured Landscapes."

27 Years Later (2004)

stable meaning can be accurately assigned to any given location or moment.[56]

In addition to recurring tropes and stories, Benning has made a point of employing methods of revisiting, recycling, and recasting. Eleven out of thirty-three scenes from *8½ × 11* (1974) are used again in *11 × 14*. "I thought, why not take some of those scenes and weave them into *11 × 14*? How would you read those scenes if you had seen both films? Would they seem the same? Would you suggest déjà vu?"[57] He inserted ten of the sixty scenes from *One Way Boogie Woogie* into *Grand Opera* in 1979[58] as well as a reedit composed from one second of each shot from *The United States of America*.[59] Shots from *8½ × 11* and *11 × 14* are revisited in *Grand Opera* and *One Way Boogie Woogie*. A sequence of all the houses he lived in before 1978 appears in *Grand Opera*. In *Him and Me* the idea of revisiting is implemented through fictional locations representing the female protagonist Jean.

The most dramatic example of recollection is *27 Years Later* (2004) for which Benning restaged his 1977 film *One Way Boogie Woogie*, which was fashioned from sixty one-minute shots. Using fixed camera positons, the film's formal compositions of Milwaukee's industrial urban landscape playfully highlight color relations, geometry, and symmetry with a fair amount of visual humor. Cars, trucks, industrial machines, and buildings are the primary actors. An old red building sits next to a green one forming the background before which a red 1970 Volkswagen squareback drives to the right and seconds later a green version of the same vehicle drives to the left. A few people performing simple actions play supporting roles. For instance, two redheaded women who are twins flank the office door of a rust-colored building. One sips a Coke while the other simultaneously drags on a cigarette. The paired sounds of a telephone ringing and a foghorn

56) In *Grand Opera* (1979), Benning hints at one source for his creative structuring of elements: "My father worked at home drawing plans in the back room and tried to invent things in the basement. Sometimes he would take a break from work and play solitaire while watching soap operas on TV. He never watched the same story but would rather watch different stories as if they were one."

57) MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2*, p. 233.

58) "Cut up into 24 frames lengths, each scene is assigned a digit from 0,1,2,3 4,5,6,7,8, and 9; and then re-edited according to the digits of pi, 3.1415926535." Correspondence with the author, April 2007.

59) James Benning, "Sound and Stills from *Grand Opera*," *October*, no. 12 (Spring 1980), pp. 22–45. This includes method notes on scenes: "Reedit *The United States of America*: use one second from each shot, cross the US in 99 seconds. Distance as a function of time: d = rt."

blasting are repeated throughout the scene. The mundane movements of vehicles including bulldozers are animated through Benning's staging, and aestheticized through his meticulous framing. Interplay between colors within and across shots unfolds like a game of tag. *One Way Boogie Woogie* is a visual poem that infuses the mundane with delight. It is also a portrait of Benning's Milwaukee. "I used to play in that section of Milwaukee as a kid. We would hop freights and take them to the baseball games at County Stadium. It's a rather romantic place for me, although I didn't want to romanticize the factories."[60]

To make *27 Years Later* Benning searched for each of the original locations, which have been variously transmuted over time, and sought out the people who initially performed the simple actions in *One Way Boogie Woogie*, although a few were unavailable or had died. These two films have been joined into one symbiotic work, producing a new film while recirculating an old one.

The shots in *27 Years Later* are based on revisiting rather than on formal and aesthetic concerns, as was the case in *One Way Boogie Woogie*. Consequently, it does not yield commensurate visual pleasure. Instead, we are faced with signs of time passed: decaying industrial culture, formerly active places turned dormant, absence, distinctive old buildings replaced by nondescript modern ones, and more barbed wire fences.

The film bears witness to the conversion of an aesthetic urban environment exuding character to one of relative blandness. That Benning locates and reshoots many of the people in *One Way Boogie Woogie* twenty-seven years later is somehow remarkable. It is affecting to see them again and just as places register age so do they. But unlike many of the places, they each express grace in their brief performances.

The soundtrack of *27 Years Later* is the same as that of the original film—ambient with several broadcast and song segments. "By using the same soundtrack twice I was able to provide the audience with a tool to map the second film back onto the first. This of course was necessary since many things had changed in the past twenty-seven years and not always did I reconstruct the narratives in the same exact ways."[61] Even though the picture in *27 Years Later* is only loosely synched with what we hear, the sound helps us—through memory—to link the shots of each film together in a one-to-one correspondence. Benning achieved one point of contact between what we hear and what we see in each

60) James Benning quoted in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2*, p. 233.

61) Correspondence with the author, April 2007.

scene of the second film, and says "What I like is the ghost of the shot from *One Way Boogie Woogie* residing in the subsequent reciprocal shot."[62] A related dislodging strategy used in *UTOPIA* (1998) pairs a soundtrack pirated in its entirety from Richard Dindo's film *Ernesto Che Guevara, the Bolivian Journal* (1994), with a collection of landscape images shot in Death Valley south to, and crossing, the Mexican border.[63] Image duration is dictated by the rhythm of the narrated vignettes, which are derived primarily from Guevara's guerilla warfare journal and supplemented by third-person narration of events, speeches, and first-hand accounts by peasants who encountered the group. The spoken journal chronicles battles, the tragedy of individual deaths, and the struggle of their journey as the number and strength of the guerillas dwindle. We simultaneously hear ambient sound of the Bolivian tropics and of the places pictured. The doubly dynamic operation of the audio superimposed on imagery, and of imagery on audio, points to overarching economic and political conditions beyond the immediate stories told. The soundtrack renders the border region of the Imperial Valley a space for the projection of revolution, made even more explicit toward the end when the story of Guevara's chronological narrative is imbued with even greater emotional content due to the images being metaphoric, and in many cases desolate—ripe for projecting onto.

One Way Boogie Woogie/27 Years Later implicates viewers through a recollection of what they saw just before and activates a field of analysis and possible connections between memory, history, longevity, and discontinuance. For Benning, *27 Years Later* is both mirror and method for witnessing time and measuring distance. He revisits Milwaukee to grasp its transformation as well as changes in himself, as he, like landscape, is a function of time.

Benning's work is as much a record of his consciousness in time and place, and therefore memory and how he incorporates time and place within himself, as it is concerned with

62) Benning explains, "There is a different process between the two films. For the first film, sound is post synched to picture, and for the second film, picture is post synched to sound. With the first film, the sound can be made to sync at all points; with the second film, picture can be made to sync only at one point. This is because in the first film I can edit the sound to match the picture; but for the second film I can't edit the picture, as it is one continuous take of sixty seconds. Therefore sync can only be made to occur at one point, unless I am lucky, for example, if two cars pass in the second film at the same place as in the first film." Correspondence with the author, April 2007.

63) Benning, *Fifty Years to Life*, pp. 211–236.

society, industry, race, history, landscape, the Midwest, the American West, and America at large.

The methodological centrality of the personal carries through his complete œuvre. He has commented: "It's not hard for me to tell things about myself personally—that's the easy part. The hard part about making personal work is not to make it one man's problem—not to make a film that just refers to my own grief. Who cares about that? I want people to be able to enter the film through their own lives ... But by myself being open I think they can be open to themselves. That's what I think a personal film has to do—has to show a trust but then it has to become more meaningful than what that story is about. It has to be bigger."[64]

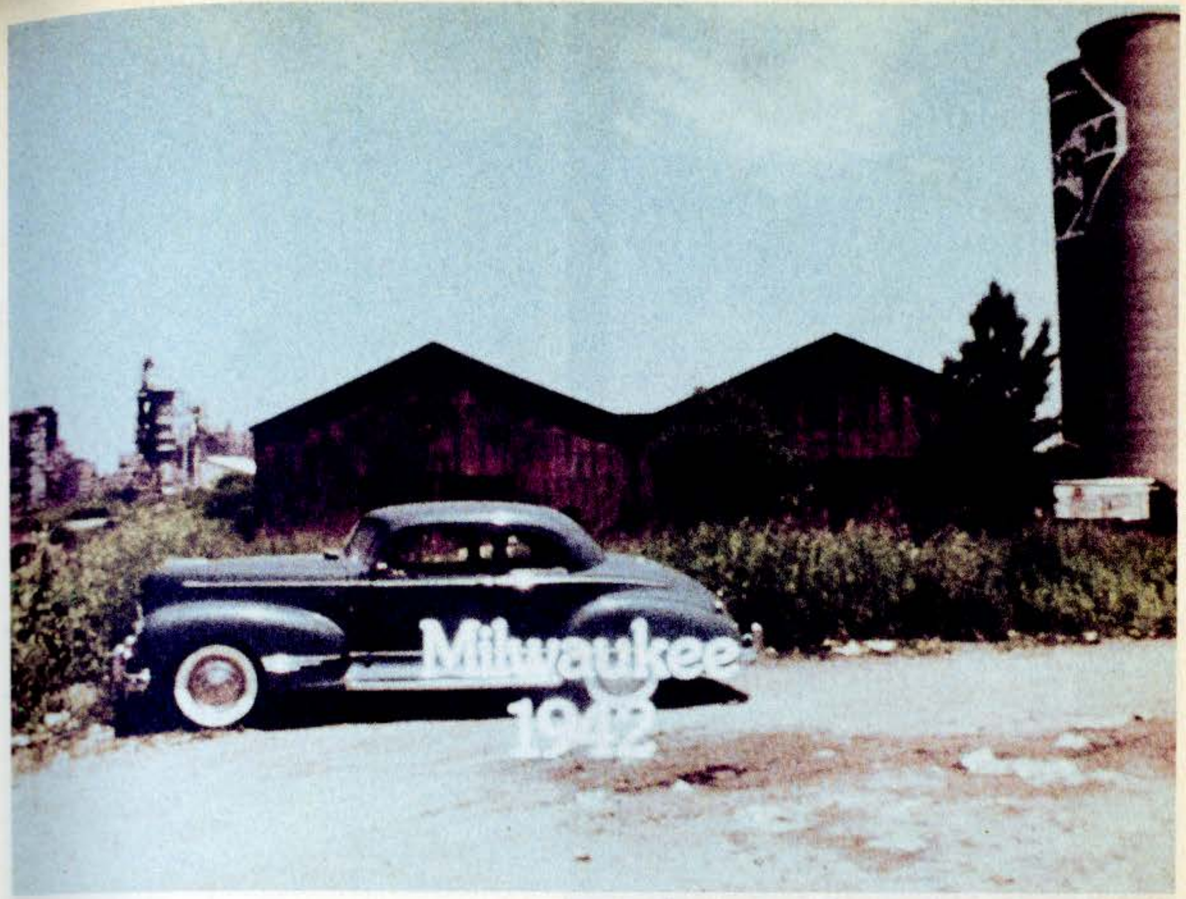
Benning's films invite us to enter into dialogue with the world through private narrative, journey, intimacy, and solitude. An undertow of personal rumination and transformation is exposed in order to open outward and link to larger collective forces. We learn from his art that the personal is not a discrete realm: it is a far-reaching and empowering connective force that describes and inscribes the individual and the world simultaneously.

The diverse methods, subjects, frameworks, and aesthetics evidenced in Benning's work over time reflect that he is a multi-faceted person endlessly interested in exploration, discovery, and invention. Such diversity expresses exemplary independence. Benning is committed to remaining radically indeterminate and seems laid back about the issue of artistic coherence: "If you compare *11×14* (1976) to *American Dreams* (1984) to *Deseret* (1995) to *TEN SKIES* (2004), in one way they seem to have little common ground, but then again, maybe they're all the same film."[65]

The independent filmmaker John Cassavetes once said, "It's hard to explain what 'independence' means—but to those who have it, film is still a mystery, not a way out. (...) To still do what you want after ten years, twenty years, is something."[66]

James Benning has been doing precisely that for thirty-five years and counting. For him, creative freedom is infinite desire.

64) James Benning quoted in Wulf, *Circling the Image*.
65) Correspondence with the author, October 2006.
66) Ray Carney (ed.), *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 199.



Him and Me (1981)

American Dreams (lost and found) (1984)

O Panama (1985)

Landscape Suicide (1986)

Barbara Pichler

Into the Great Wide Open

North on Evers *(1991) to* UTOPIA *(1998)*

Depictions of land and cityscapes pervade Benning's entire body of work, but landscape itself becomes the definitive theme as of *North On Evers* (1991). In effect it largely constitutes the exclusive visual content of his subsequent films to this day. Dick Hebdige describes the films created since the beginning of the 1990s as "landscape" or "place portrait films,"[1] and terms such as 'landscape artist' (in the domain of film) or 'landscape filmmaker' are fully justified. The singularity of this focus is perhaps informed by Benning's altered living situation: He moves from New York City to California in 1987, to teach in the School of Film and Video at CalArts (California Institute of the Arts). Instead of settling in the college town where the school is located, or moving to nearby Los Angeles, he decides to live in Val Verde, a small and rather isolated valley town cradled in the rolling hills that are characteristic of California. Benning consolidates his various interests in the films that follow: He concentrates on the relationship between landscape as a physical space and both the collective and individual stories that play out in its midst. He finds formally diverse ways to transmit this relationship filmically, utilizing new ways of working with image and text.

North on Evers is a hybrid. It provides a transition from the previous phase of work, preoccupied with autobiography and strongly influenced by specific forms of inter-textuality, to the subsequent films with their singular focus upon landscape. The point of departure for the film was a motorcycle road trip from California to the East Coast and the diary Benning kept enroute. He wrote a thorough report of his journey for a friend a few months later based on the diary. This in turn became the basis for a screenplay. In the following summer of 1990, he repeats the journey with a camera to document it on film. Although *North on Evers* is in this sense Benning's most obviously autobiographical film, he himself describes it as "landscapes from the United States and portraits of sixty people (...). The landscapes are mostly empty and rural or industrial; the portraits are like snapshots."[2]

In *North on Evers*, Benning proceeds with a strategy established in earlier films, layering levels of meaning and perception by interlacing the two cross-country road trips: The first journey is conveyed by the black letters of a

1) Dick Hebdige, "Reeling in Utah: The Travel Log Trilogy," reprint from *Afterall*, no. 8 (2003) in this volume, p. 130.

2) James Benning: *Fifty Years to Life. Texts from Eight Films by James Benning* (Madison, WI: Two Pants Press, 2000), p. 148.

handwritten text that scrolls from right to left at the bottom of the screen. The second journey is captured by the footage he shot and sound he recorded when revisiting a given territory. These two narrative planes are out of sync in two senses of the word: On the one hand, the images are one year ahead of the written text. On the other hand, image and text are always slightly displaced. The words never precisely describe the images they accompany, aside from one brief moment. Benning "wanted to create two visual tracks; one you see, and one you create in your mind as you read."[3] The audience is required to actively respond to the gaps. This experience is characteristic of several Benning films, and is especially true of the text-image works since *American Dreams* (1984). It "requires us to distinguish different times and spaces *and* to continually synthesize them within the overall design of his film."[4]

The soundtrack of *North on Evers* consists entirely of ambient sound, while the text narrating Benning's trip flows as an endless stream of written words throughout the entire film. He writes about exhaustion, heat, dust, and rain, he narrates events related to certain locations and how he perceives the countryside he is crossing. The text is like a track that travels through space and history. It connects the events of the journey to Benning's person and his experiences, but it also ties his individual story to a collective history of the US, determined by class differences, racism, and economic problems. Benning describes Val Verde, his place of residence and the starting point of the road trip, as a former "black resort town (…) separate but not equal." A laid-off miner sees the declining mining town of Boron as a "one horse town that was wounded." He stops at Graceland and visits Jackson, Mississippi, where Medgar Evers was killed, the man who lent the film its title.[5] He passes through Sturgis, South Dakota, where he finds a booth run by the Ku Klux Klan: "They were selling posters of Martin Luther King with cross hairs

3) Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5. Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 233.

4) Scott MacDonald, "Re-envisioning the American West," in MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine. A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 101.

5) Medgar Wiley Evers (1925–1963) was an African American civil rights activist from Mississippi. As NAACP Field Secretary (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in Mississippi he was involved in a boycott campaign against white merchants and was instrumental in eventually desegregating the University of Mississippi. On June 12, 1963 he was assassinated by a sniper, just hours after President John F. Kennedy's famous speech on national television in support of civil rights. Based on an entry in Wikipedia for "Medgar Evers," accessed in August 2007, www.wikipedia.org.

North on Evers (1991)

zeroed on his face. A caption under the picture read, Our Dream Came True." He looks for Mose Tolliver,[6] but can't remember the exact location of his house. He visits the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C. … and the list goes on.

The text forges a path through the US that sometimes gets lost when the black letters become illegible in dark parts of the picture, an effect that Benning describes as a "fight between text and image."[7] This relationship remains volatile and is central as he "likes that the text doesn't reveal itself easily." He wants to "convince people that language is not that important and it's okay to quit on it for a while." The image component of the film also reveals a panorama of the US consisting of social layers and ways of life. Sixty people, old friends and chance acquaintances Benning encountered over the course of his travels, are visually represented through a series of filmic snapshots. Upon being asked about this uncharacteristic stylistic device, Benning simply replied: "I like the portraits a lot. I think everybody that I know well in the film is really represented as themselves. As for the people I don't know, it's certainly what I felt they were." The snapshot reveals itself as the expression of a personal and spontaneous relationship. And near the end of the film, Benning includes his own self-portrait in the series.

The footage Benning shoots of the landscape in *North on Evers* can also be perceived as snapshots. He frames the landscape in long shots organized according to a central perspective, rendering each motif equivalent to the other—regardless of whether the subject is a scenic view, an industrial site or Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. However, his use of the handheld camera is untypical, a visual style partially determined by the limitations of motorcycle travel: "It is handheld, because I couldn't get a tripod onto the bike. Well, I suppose I could have if I had tried, but I thought maybe this film should be more diaristic, more home-movie-like."[8] It is an expository form indebted to the constant momentum of the road movie. The editing

6) Mose Tolliver (1915–2006) was a prolific African-American folk artist and is one of Benning's favorite painters.

7) James Benning in conversation with Barbara Pichler and Claudia Slanar. All direct quotations and references unless noted are taken from a series of interviews with the editors in California and Vienna in spring and autumn of 2006.

8) MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5*, p. 232.

further heightens this restlessness. In some passages the images follow so fast and furious that the film feels like a speeding slide show of landscapes racing by. The possibility of an attentive concentration is replaced by an accumulation of moments and a discontinuity of space. These are held together purely through the movement of the trip and the text. "Travel," writes anthropologist Marc Augé, "constructs a fictional relationship between gaze and landscape," a relationship that is always determined by "a discontinuity between the spectator-traveller and the pace of the landscape he is contemplating or rushing through. This prevents him from perceiving it as a place, from being fully present in it."[9] The landscape becomes a medium of transportation by way of Benning's biography: "In *North on Evers*, I'm using landscape to reveal my movement across the country and to document how the landscape changes, geographically and historically. I use landscape as a way of moving through and looking at particular histories that are part of my past."[10]

Although Benning himself indicates that the text should not be overvalued, it is the text that expands and transforms the fiction of the journey. The text is a guide to his experiences, leading us through the landscape and returning us to moments of collective experience. The film also comes full circle, ending in Val Verde where it began, the road movie most fittingly ending with the national anthem played on an electric guitar.

When asked about role models Benning has repeatedly maintained that, although his work has other filmic influences, the biggest is always the film prior to his current project.[11] This is true both in terms of the formal and aesthetic concerns that variously pervade his films, as well as his visual preoccupations and thematic interests. During the shooting of *North on Evers*, Benning drove across the state of Utah. The beauty and history of the state so impressed him that he returned there to shoot his next film.

Deseret (1995) is Benning's view of the landscape and history of Utah. It is narrated by a clear confrontation of image and text. Benning says that he initially wanted to write a history of Utah until he realized a history had obviously already been written. During the course of his research, he came across articles about Utah published by *The New York Times*. According to him, he read every article on Utah published from the founding of the newspaper in 1851 to 1992. He appropriates these articles for the film and in so doing integrates an image of Utah that speaks out of the historical moment. He chooses 94 articles and reduces each to between eight and ten sentences, distilling the relevant information. These texts are heard as a voice-over, the date of their publication appearing as a text insert. They are combined with extremely impressive images of the state shot at all seasons of the year. Benning connects these images and texts in a highly formalized structure. He "wanted the language to carry the drama, rather than the voice."[12] The text is purposely conveyed by an impassive narration that reminds Benning of the authoritative style of educational television. The sound is as strictly staged as the landscape: One static landscape shot accompanies every sentence. Between the abridged newspaper articles a subsequent shot effectively functions as a separating element. It is accompanied by ambient sound normally heard in the background, as the voice-over falls silent. *Deseret* progressively picks up momentum. The articles Benning excerpts reflect his perception of the progressive terseness of journalistic language over the course of history. This strategy stresses both the elapse of historical as well as filmic time. The first half of the film is in black and white, the second in color. The transition occurs in 1896, when Utah was recognized as a state. *The New York Times* not only changed its attitude toward the new state at this time but also coincidentally altered its typeface—the film's transition is appropriate in every respect. Each sequence includes a shot that corresponds directly to the respective location of an historical event—though on occasion only metaphorically speaking. The remaining shots are not bound by parameters. Every image encodes the landscape in a particular way, as well as every word. This is why Benning consciously chooses to avoid thematically obvious sequences.

The composition of image in *Deseret* is very rigorous. Benning works with a tripod, the images are clearly framed and minimalist in their dispassionate observation of the landscape as captured by long shots. Film historian P. Adams Sitney has written about three characteristic forms of representing landscape on film, irrespective of genre. These conventions were already well established at the dawn of cinema: the mobile camera, more precisely the pan and tracking shot, both specific to the medium, and the central perspective of the long

9) Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London/New York: Verso 1995), p. 86 and p. 84.

10) MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5*, p. 232

11) Ibid., p. 242

12) Ibid., p. 237

shot.[13] During the course of his development as a filmmaker, Benning utilized each of these means of representation. However, the long shot has come to dominate his work and as of *Deseret*, he concentrates on exploring its aesthetic and narrative potential. The film consists of autonomous views that function like filmic postcards and present the multifaceted nature of Utah's landscape. Benning enjoys making his way through the countryside and has a simple explanation for his interest in landscape: "I enjoy being outside, and I like looking. I like walking, and I like the way you feel when you're in a landscape, the way you can measure yourself against landscape, the way landscape puts you into a proper perspective."[14] His films are always in part a translation of his own experiences of a landscape, an attempt to re-present these experiences filmically. He doesn't lock himself into the beauty of the landscape but accepts it as the material of a fascinating interest. For Benning, this act of visual appropriation, whether in regard to a wilderness, cultural or industrial landscape, is a matter of aesthetic pleasure and sight seeing.[15] The visual pleasure that Benning enjoys through his images continues with the transition from black and white to color, playing with the drama of changing modes of aesthetic of representation.

Benning's images of the American West evoke associations with the classical landscape painting, for example Frederic Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt who captured the virgin wilderness of the 'New World' on canvas in the second half of the 19th century. Other shots feel as if they momentarily transport us to the world of a classical John Ford Western. Benning knows that he is not working in a vacuum. "I am aware of how people look at light and how they make compositions. But I don't actually think that much about it. Mainly, I just pay attention, I

13) P. A. Sitney, "Landscape in the cinema: the rhythms of the world and the camera," in Salim Kemal/Ivan Gaskell (eds.) *Landscape, natural beauty and the arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 107–108.

14) James Benning as quoted in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5*, p. 232. See further articles in this volume as to Benning's personal experience of the landscape and its filmic translation: Dick Hebdige, p. 130–154; Amanda Yates discusses the principle of 'looking and listening' in relation to Benning's pedagogy, pp. 155–168.

15) This fascination harkens back to a category of image characteristic of early cinema, namely the 'view'. Benning examines the view with increasing intensity as of the 'California Trilogy'. Tom Gunning explains that the 'view aesthetic' is not specifically staged by film but rather represents an intact interest in the manifestation of our environment, a direct gratification of our [visual] curiosity. Tom Gunning, "Before documentary: early nonfiction films and the 'view' aesthetic," in Daan Hertogs/ Nico de Klerk (eds.), *Uncharted Territory. Essays on early nonfiction film* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1997) pp. 9–24.

look and I listen and that influences me the most." Benning is conscious of being associated with Ansel Adams, one of the most prominent representatives of American landscape photography—both in an aesthetic sense as well as geographically: both have repeatedly filmed or photographed the same locations. But Benning denies consciously referencing Adams or agreeing with him conceptually: "The landscape is so grand in Utah and it's hard not to think of Adams at times because he focused on that grandeur in all his photographs. But the landscapes themselves speak pretty clearly and I think I set them in a different context. All through *Deseret* I think you are considering completely other criteria."

Benning places dominating landscapes devoid of people within a historical and social context, witholding the possibility of a purely aesthetic contemplation. In addition, *Deseret* is a confrontation of lifestyles posited through text and image. He creates a progression of natural and cultural landscapes, essentially corresponding to a dichotomy between nature and culture. Natural landscapes are confronted with urban and industrial spaces; traces of the original inhabitants of these regions are present in the form of rock paintings and abandoned pueblos which are contrasted to the presence of white settlers as evident in cities, bureaucratic architecture, and industrial plants. This confrontation is a central strategy of the film, through which "everything that would be human would either come from the text or from the remnants of human settlement, be it the petroglyphs or the ruins of some pueblo, or urban and industrial sites." Within this fundamental dichotomy, a further front is opened through text: between the Mormons and the political, cultural and especially religious establishment of the East Coast which is expressed by the *New York Times* articles. Text and image are intended to communicate and encode one another. It is precisely this dialectical interface that prevents the stunning qualities of Benning's footage from being reduced to a romantic reading of the landscape. *Deseret* is not only a geographical but also an ideological map. Benning understands the landscape as a site of human (inter)action, a place where historical and cultural processes leave their mark. The individual does not have a role to play in this context, the film is entirely devoid of people, apart from two isolated portraits—two little girls dressed in their Sunday best and a Mormon family at home on their farm. Individual access and the personalizing of landscape through a subjective narrative as in *North on Evers* is replaced by a historical

development that is confronted also through its effects upon the landscape. This is stressed by a second theme that pervades the film with increasing intensity as the texts approach the present time: namely, the ecological threat looming over Utah, primarily through the mining of Uranium and nuclear tests. Benning takes this idea so far as to describe *Deseret* as a "political re-reading of what happens to beauty itself"—at the end of the film a billboard ironically reads: "Utah, still the right place."

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Benning's subsequent films continue with this fragmentation of chronological and spatial linearity, and the resulting impossibility of a unified or contained sense of space, be it physical or historical. *Four Corners* (1997) keeps him in the same neighborhood geographically, in the region where Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona meet up. The boundaries of these states were mapped out on a drawing board, they consist of clear lines and right angles—a geometric grid. Benning adopts this rigid linearity in the structure of the film. *Four Corners* is composed of four parts that are identically constructed. They each commence in silence with a scrolling text that conveys biographical information about an artist and a specific painting. A static shot of the work of art follows, accompanied by an unrelated voice-over. The conclusion of each section consists of thirteen landscape shots only accompanied by ambient sound, chronicling locations connected to the previously narrated story. The four parts are meant to be equivalent to one another which is why each of the written texts have the exact same number of characters—1,214—and the spoken text has the exact same number of words—1,186. However, because the speed of speech differs in each section, the amount of time that the artworks are onscreen also varies. Each landscape shot has a duration of fifty seconds.

Whereas Benning maps the story of Utah along a linear trajectory in *Deseret*, he entirely abandons linear time and space with *Four Corners*. He thereby achieves an extremely tight interlacing of image and sound, the visible and the spoken, and the historical and geographical spaces.

Benning uses paintings and the biographies of artists to indicate social and cultural parameters in a way that parallels his use of music in other films—material that he relates to his particular vision of American history. His commencement with Claude Monet, a European artist, speaks to Benning's introduction to the field of history. "When I learned American

Four Corners (1997)

history it started in Europe. I didn't even question that when I was younger, but that changed later." Monet is followed by African-American folk artist Mose Tolliver, a painter who fascinated Benning by the "idea of a hard working person whose life gets destroyed by work and who is saved by art." This thoroughly romantic notion of an artistic calling is also seen in the third biography. The story of Yukawa (142–168), a female Anasazi rock painter, is a fiction based on general facts that to Benning is "just as real as the other biographies." In pursuit of a further romantic figure, Benning declines the widely accepted assumption that men were the sole creators of rock paintings among the Anasazi. Jasper Johns is last in the series, an artist that Benning appreciates for "picking an everyday object and turning it into a visual object, a representation of art, not a symbol." The biographical abstracts are conveyed in a most minimal form, as white text slowly scrolling on a black background. The accompanying silence focuses attention entirely upon the biographical information and how the artworks were generated. The painting is subsequently presented.

The gaze is now able to concentrate on the painting, yet a voice-over tears the work of art from its historical and geographical environment, placing it in a new context. The narration chronicles migratory movements and the colonization of the US, the need for land, the fight for territory, the notion of a Manifest Destiny and its consequences.[16] A history is generated that conveys how the Four Corners can be seen as crosshairs in the telescopic sights of a destructive weapon. The story of Richard Weatherill accompanies Monet's *Champ de coquelicots environs de Giverny (Poppy Field Near Giverny,* 1885). Weatherill was the first white man to discover Indian settlements at Mesa Verde. He proceeded to exploit 'his discovery' by every means available. Mose Tolliver's portrait of *George Washington* (1989) is related to an historical survey of Benning's hometown of Milwaukee. The text begins with the first settlements in the region and spans the history of the city, culminating

16) The phrase 'Manifest Destiny' refers to a belief that the United States were destined to expand from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific Ocean. It became the basis for US settlement politics and has also been used to advocate for or justify other territorial acquisitions. Advocates of Manifest Destiny believed that expansion was not only good, but that it was obvious ('manifest') and certain ('destiny'). Based on a Wikipedia entry for "Manifest Destiny," accessed in August 2007, www.wikipedia.org

with Benning's own memories of racial conflicts between whites and blacks and the decline of his neighborhood district. The frontier wanders back West with the third segment dedicated to Native American culture. A rock painting by an unknown Anasazi artist entitled *Holy Ghost* (ca. AD 100) is accompanied by a spoken text about the settlement of the region 20,000 years prior, its annexation by Spain, the battles between Mexico and the USA, and how the American government mistreated the native inhabitants of its country. *Flag* (1955) by Jasper Johns concludes the film. A text is heard retracing the development of Farmington, New Mexico, which eventually becomes the biggest city in the Four Corners region. Its recent history is shaped by alcoholism, race riots and conflicts between energy companies and the native Navajo Nation which legally owns a portion of the land being contested.

The texts are read by four different filmmakers in order to further interweave time and space: The first part is read by the German Hartmut Bitomsky, in reference to European history; Benning reads the second part himself, revisiting Milwaukee and his roots; the third part is read by the Korean Yeasup Song, in allusion to the Asian origin of Anasazi culture; the last part is read by black filmmaker Bill Woodberry, whose story about the racism in Farmington, New Mexico also ties back in to Milwaukee and Benning's biography.

The landscapes that follow the paintings and stories are solely accompanied by ambient sound. Benning shoots locations devoid of people, yet one is always conscious of their impact on the landscape. This conscious staging of emptiness, characteristic of Benning's work, is heightened through the duration of the shots, focusing attention and engaging a level of awareness that pervades all of the films Benning has made since the late 1990s.

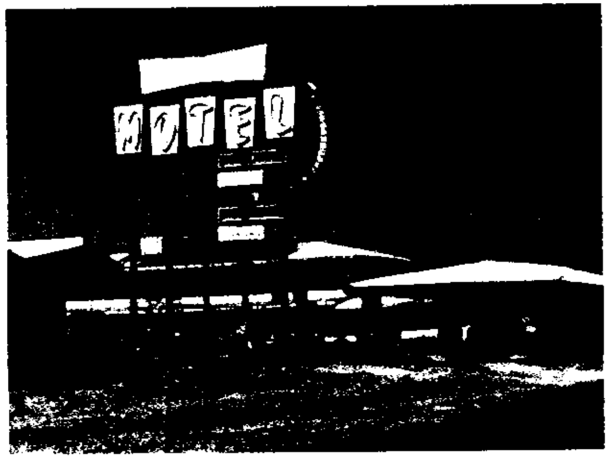
Scott MacDonald describes *Four Corners* as dealing with four kinds of history: geological, sociopolitical, art and personal history.[17] Benning plays with official histories and creates a revised version by connecting particular elements. In *Deseret*, landscapes are always accompanied by words. In contrast, the words heard in *Four Corners* resonate beyond their spoken time and deepen our understanding of landscape, inviting us to supply our own associations and draw our own conclusions. The past is ever present in the current moment Benning portrays. He ties the collective history represented by landscapes to

17) MacDonald, "Satan's National Park," in *The Garden in the Machine*, p. 344

Deseret (1995)

individual biographies. And his own biography provides him with the point of departure: "In a way the film came out of this attempt to try to put my life in a larger context. For example I connected Milwaukee and Wisconsin with the Four Corners because I grew up with the same kind of misunderstanding and hatred for blacks that poor whites and Navajos still have for each other in that area. I liked making comparisons and drawing things together like this." Benning describes his construction of history as "kind of a misrepresentation of official history," especially relevant in connection with Native American culture: "I wanted to start my history in Indian culture rather than European culture. That's where America starts." This concern is additionally established by the first and last scene: The film begins with a shot of a log fire blazing against a black sky accompanied by ambient sound and "Song for the Journey" by Little Wolf Band. The film ends with an insert quoting Black Elk: "Sometimes dreams are wiser than waking." A shot of Farmington, New Mexico follows, again accompanied by ambient sound. But this time we hear "I sang the Blues" by the Last Poets. Although Benning considers this allusion to Native American culture as romantic, he also defends it: "If I am going to make up my history let me make it up the way I want to. If you criticize that, you have to criticize all history not just mine."

A romantic impulse similar to the reinterpretation of American history drives *UTOPIA* (1998), which in a sense is the most radical of Benning's 'text-image-relationship' films. Here he also constructs an alternative reading of landscape and history, editing his footage to the complete soundtrack of Richard Dindo's documentary *Ernesto Che Guevara, The Bolivian Diary* (Switzerland/France 1994). Dindo reconstructs the last twenty days in the life of Che Guevara, preceding his assassination in 1967. The film is based on Che's diary and narrates his trip through Bolivia by utilizing eyewitness reports and documents. As in *Deseret*, Benning appropriates outside material. In this case, he does not have the filmmaker's permission, a fact he reveals through a text inserted before the opening shot of the film. Benning describes how this aspect of the project amused him, and after meeting Dindo at a film festival, he got the impression that the filmmaker appreciated the perpetuation of his



UTOPIA (1998)

work. The linear narrative of Dindo's soundtrack, occasionally supplemented by ambient sound, is juxtaposed to Benning's travel footage. Benning explains that he "simply started and just gathered the images and sounds" in South California–from the desert of Death Valley to the Imperial Valley and across the border into Mexico–and subsequently assembled them with the soundtrack: "I transferred Dindo's soundtrack to magnetic film and then counted frames to measure the length of each section of the film's narration. Then I did a shot for each paragraph of the film. It was a very economical process. After I did all the shots—I think there were 156 shots in the film, and I shot maybe 250—I put them in those slide holders that hold 16mm film, and I actually edited the film on slides as I read the text. Once I had the order figured out, then I went back and cut the work print to the sound. The whole process is kind of a poor man's Avid system."[18]

Whereas the landscapes are again devoid of people and consist almost entirely of static shots aside from two tracking shots, the narration is in constant motion. The relationship between sound and image is purely associative, the two components autonomously drifting alongside one another, only to make surprising contact at certain junctures. Benning's device of superimposing New York and Vietnam through a text insert in *Him and Me,* finds a parallel here. The landscape of Southern California is inscribed by a Utopian, socio-political vision through the soundtrack—the figure of Che functioning less as an actual political person and more as a Utopian medium. Che's experience of traditional

18) James Benning quoted by Holly Willis, *L.A. Weekly* (Jan 27 1999).

imperialism and the exploitation of weaker nations, which became the basis of a political struggle eventually leading to Bolivia, is transposed onto Southern California, where "a kind of reversed imperialism exists. Here, cheap labor is brought in so that it can be exploited."[19]

Nowhere in Benning's body of work is the gap between text and image so divergent. The merging of Che's battle with a landscape that reveals the effects of imperialism in reverse, where the effects of capitalism and modern agricultural industries are continually in evidence, goes beyond a historical rereading of landscape and space. Benning transports a wish and the idea of revolution to California, his images inviting interpretation. A strangely oscillating, associative connection is generated between physical landscape and its appropriation—through political ideas as well as industrial strategies—between Utopia and the reality represented by these images.

While Benning is conscious of its implicit naivety he shares the desire for revolution, but nonetheless contends with reality. The film ends in silence with the insertion of a text that accepts the failure of this Utopian idea: A short description of Imperial Valley and its industry is followed by a note about Mexicans who died trying to cross the US border illegally. The final paragraph is a survey of Imperial Valley as an eco system whose fauna is subject to the law of nature, 'eat or be eaten'—a code that Benning would no doubt also attribute to the capitalist system.

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Benning's investigation of the relationship between text and image, his play with text and intermediality reach a conclusion with Utopia. In retrospect, while the appropriation of a found soundtrack renders a radicalized form it also appears to overextend a concept to the point of exhaustion. He wanted to end his investigations of the 'text/image-relationship' with a strong statement: "I end with stealing Dindo's soundtrack. I thought that's a good place to end that investigation, with a theft, and to now really go back and make images again." Benning's landscape films circle around the relationship between the landscape, its history and representation, between the 'reality' of a physical space and its interpretation—be it individual or collective. He creates a virtual geography that speaks volumes about the reality of America.

Translated by Eve Heller

19) James Benning quoted in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5*, p. 241.

Dick Hebdige

Reeling in Utah: The Travel Log Trilogy*

One is always crossing the horizon yet it always remains distant. In this line where sky meets earth, objects cease to exist ... Since the car was at all times on some left-over horizon, one might say that the car was imprisoned in a line, a line that is in no way linear ... the distance seemed to put restrictions on all forward movement, thus bringing the car to a countless series of standstills.

Robert Smithson

Some people like to believe in a lot of nonsense.
A road is a road ...
– Springrock, NM resident, Verona Watts, responding in the *Salt Lake Tribune* (07/30/03) to the news that, thanks to negative PR generated by the Book of Revelations, Hwy 666 linking Gallup, NM to Monticello, UT is about to be renamed Hwy 491
... is a road ...

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PREAMBLE (HEAD)

While I was an actor in the five-day road-trip piece documented below I played no part either in choosing the destinations, planning the route or operating the vehicle. The road-trip piece was composed, choreographed and directed by JB as a 'film-with-no-film' commissioned by *Afterall* for the purposes of this documentation (with gas, motel and restaurant receipts retained for reimbursement). The intent was for JB to structure an experience framed by an itinerary linking sites that feature in a number of his works. The piece would be orchestrated in such a way as to expose, through mimesis, JB's working methods, focal concerns and the 'driven' quality of his attachment both to place and to independent 16mm filmmaking. *Reeling in Utah* thus reverses the road-loop-to-film-spool sequence established in *North on Evers* (1991). Whereas the latter work consists of a retracing onto film a cross-country round trip JB made in 1989 with a hand-written account of the original journey scrolling right to left at the bottom of the frame, the present work is a written account by DH of a journey designed by JB to encompass a circuit of (25) sites that appear in a number of the 'landscape' or 'place portrait' films JB has been making since the early 1990s. (Specifically *North on Evers*, *Deseret* [1995], *Four Corners* [1997], *UTOPIA* [1998], *Sogobi* [2001], and *13 LAKES* [forthcoming, 2004]). Sites visited are listed **(a)** through **(z)** in the coda appended to the itinerary which forms Part One of the *Travel Log Trilogy*).

There was also a possibility that, if the atmospheric conditions were right, JB would do a (10min) re-shoot at Great Salt Lake for *13 LAKES*, the film he is currently making. Always keen to proselytize on behalf of the generative power of the constrictive rule, JB suggested at one point in the planning stage that I opt for a fly-on-the-wall approach and volunteer to remain confined for the duration of the piece to the rear of the vehicle, bound by a vow of silence, thus assuming the position and duplicating the role of the rear-mounted camera trained on the windscreen over the shoulders of the protagonists in *The United States of America* (JB, Bette Gordon, 1975). After some discussion this idea was dropped on logistical grounds and we opted instead for the cinematically more demotic 'buddy' format evidenced below.

PART ONE: TRAVELOGARITHM

This is a map that will take you somewhere but when you get there you won't really know where you are. In a sense the non-site is the centre of the system and the site itself is the fringe or the edge ...

Robert Smithson

Day one: Saturday 07/26/03

7:30am I drive 30mi S down the 101 then 35mi E on the 126 from Carpinteria to Val Verde, transfer my bag to the trunk of JB's car and we take off (JB at the wheel from this point on) 3mi on back roads to the 5 S (10mi) to the 14 E (43mi) **(a)** to the 138 **(b)** to Victorville (58mi) where we join the 15 heading NE to Baker (110mi) then N through Vegas (90mi) (gas stop #1) 70 m NE to Mesquite on the Nevada/Arizona border (gas stop #2) where, with the prospect of 4 nights in Utah, I buy 2 bottles of red wine in a liquor store before we head 50mi N on the 70, crossing into Utah W of St George before veering E 5mi N of Central where we stop at the Mountain Meadows massacre site **(c)** at Dan Sill Hill (6000ft above sea level) on the Old Spanish Trail (massacre date: 09/11/1857; number of dead Arkansas emigrants murdered by Iron County

d = rt (distance = rate × time)
n.b: all distances below are strictly approx

Latter Day Saints militiamen 115—123; path to plaques from road approx 100yds: sign advising 'moderate hike') before retracing the route back to the 70 13mi N to the 56 at Beryl Jct then turning W 35mi to Cedar City where we rejoin the 15 N for 35mi before heading E 22mi to the 89 and turning S 12.5mi to Panguitch (burial site of John D Lee of Harmony, UT, sole perpetrator tried, convicted and executed 03/23/1877 by Mormon firing squad for his part in Mtn Meadows Massacre).[1] At Panguitch we watch goat tying **(d)** (5 attempts, 3 successful), steer roping (6 attempts, 3 successful), barrel racing (6) and bull riding (6 attempts, 2 qualifying) at a Pioneer Day rodeo at Panguitch fairgrounds.

—Distance: 500.5mi

Dinner: fish, chips (1), spaghetti, meatballs (1) + beers

Motel: $44.00 per room

Inscription on John D Lee's gravestone: 'Know he truth and the truth shall make you free'

Day two: Sunday 07/27/03

7:15am Leave Panguitch heading SE 33mi on the 12 through Bryce Canyon National Park **(e)** to Henrieville then 75mi NE on same road through Escalante (gas stop, slow pump: fill rate approx 1 gallon per minute; after 9 mins JB discovers gas spill under car due to absence of functioning cut-off mechanism on pump); then on through Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument **(f)** Box Hollow Wilderness **(g)** and Anasazi Indian Village State Park to Torrey where we turn E onto the 24 and head 52.5mi **(h, i, j)** through Hanksville (flag outside post office at 0.5-mast; buy gas + 2 baseball caps and 4qt bottles of water at Hole-in-the-Rock gas station / convenience store) then E 25mi on the Flat Tops road to Horseshoe Cyn **(k, l)** (Indian pictograph site: 3.5mi hike, temp 98.F, no hike advisory but sign-in book at head of trail and warning to carry at least 1 gallon of water per person—hike duration: 3.75 hrs) then back to Flat Top road and 40mi N on dirt road to Green River **(m)**.

—Distance: 229mi

Dinner: cheeseburger, fries (1), pork chops, potato (1) + beers

Motel: $24.99 per room

Sign on wall of breakfast stop diner in Escalante: 'Good food takes time. Your's will be right out'

1) See Juanita Brooks, *Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962).

Day three: Monday 07/28/03

7:10am Leave Green River and head E 26mi on the 70 to Thompson Springs, then 2mi N on dirt road to Sego Canyon petroglyphs **(n)** then turn back to Green River (28mi; gas stop #5) before heading 117.5mi NW on the 191/6 to join the 15 S of Provo heading N 35mi before we turn W N of Riverton 15mi to Kennecott Corp-owned Bingham Canyon open-pit Copper Mine **(o)** ('1 of 2 man-made structures ... visible from outer space ... the world's largest man-made excavation with 6 billion tons of material removed in the past 100 years over 1900 acres producing a pit more than 0.75mi in depth and 2.5mi in diameter at the top') then back 32mi via Copperton to the 15 N (36mi) through Layton then W 14.5mi through Syracuse (gas stop #6), thence, via the lake causeway, to Antelope Island **(p)** where we stand on the shore and look towards Fremont Island 7.5mi N and JB declines to take an alternate shot for the shot he took in early June because the lake surface is choppy due to a slight northerly breeze that is barely discernible on the mainland, before returning to the car and taking a 6mi side-trip to preserved Mormon sheep farm then back to the causeway heading W 14.5mi to the 15 N 30mi to Brigham City **(q, r)**.

—Distance: 356.5mi

Dinner: liver, bacon, fries (1), fish, potato (1), coffee (1), soda (1)

Motel: $31.92 per room

Information leaflet: 'Kennecott symbol is 5000 years old', available at the Bingham Canyon Copper Mine Visitors' Center:

The development of Kennecott's symbol, the ankh began about 5000 BC when the Egyptians utilized a loop with a cross beneath it to signify enduring life ... the first alchemists ... us(ed) the sign for Venus ... as a symbol for copper. From the very beginning in 1903, the original Utah Copper Company used as its logo the Venus symbol. When Kennecott purchased the Utah Copper Company in 1936, the "K" was inserted in the Venus sign ...

An interesting fact: A modern adaptation of the symbol for the planet Mercury was issued by the 7 original astronauts: Cooper, Shepard, Carpenter, Schirra, Glenn, Slayton and Grissom. The design, which substitutes a '7' for a 'K' in the Kennecott ankh, signifies the Project Mercury.

Day four: Tuesday 07/29/03

7:20am Get gas, leave Brigham City and head N 5mi on the 15 then W 29mi through Corrinne past Golden Spike National Historic Site **(s)** then 15.5mi S on dirt roads to Spiral Jetty **(t, u)** before retracing the route to Brigham City (49.5mi), where we turn onto the 15 heading 295mi S via pie, gas and restroom stop in Beaver, then turning S to avoid approaching storm and driving 20mi on the 17 to Hurricane.

—Distance: 414mi
Dinner: take-out pizza (2), 1 bottle Mesquite Liquor Store wine
Motel: $39.33 per room
CAVEAT PRINTED ON PRINTED ON PINK PAPER STAPLED TO 3 PAGE WHITE PAPER LEAFLET ENTITLED 'DETAILED DIRECTIONS TO ROBERT SMITHON'S SPIRAL JETTY' AVAILABLE ON RACK LOCATED OUTSIDE GOLDEN SPIKE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE VISITOR'S CENTRE:
Spiral Jetty is an undeveloped area …
· No facilities or potable water
· Licensed 4-wheel drive vehicles recommended Golden Spike National Hitsoric Site does not administer this area, visit at your own risk
Questions: contact Dia Center at www.diacenter.org
Directions (in brief): 1. Turn W off Hwy 83 at Lampo Junction and then drive W, another 7.7mi up E side of Promontory Pass to the GSNHS (nb. The Lampo Jctn Sign has recently disappeared, so look for sign directing visitors to GSNHS); 2. From Visitor Center drive 5.6mi W on gravel road; 3. Take S (left) fork on Box County Class D road; 4. Cross cattle guard #1; 5. Drive 1.3mi S; 6. Turn right onto SW fork; 7. Go 1.7mi to cattle guard #2; 8. Continue SW 1.2mi to cattle guard #3; 9. Drive 0.5mi to fence; 10. Continue 2.3mi SSW to a combination fence, cattle guard #4; iron-pipe fence with RAFTER S. RANCH and NO TRESPASSING signs. 11. At this gate the Class D road designation ends. If you choose to continue S for another 2.3mi, and around the E side of Rozel Point, you should see the Lake and a jetty (not the Spiral Jetty) left by oil drilling exploration in the 1920s through the 1980s. As you approach the Lake you should see an abandoned pink-and-white trailer (mostly white), an old amphibious landing craft, an old Dodge truck … and other assorted trash.

From this location, the trailer is the key to finding the road to the Spiral Jetty. As you drive slowly past the trailer, turn immediately from the SW to the W (right), passing on the S side of the Dodge, and onto a two-track trail that contours above the oil-drilling debris below. This is not much of a road! Only high-clearance vehicles should advance beyond the trailer. Go slow! The road is narrow; brush might scratch your vehicle, and the rocks, if not properly negotiated, could high-centre your vehicle. Don't hesitate to park and walk. The Jetty is just around the corner …

Day five: Wednesday 07/30/03

7:30am Leave Hurricane head 25mi SE on the 59 to Colorado City (formerly Short Creek) **(v)** for breakfast then 127.5mi on a loop S into Arizona on the 389 via the Kaibab Reservation before turning N into Utah on the 89 (gas/restroom stop at Kanab), then on through Zion National Park **(w)**, with a detour S on dirt roads outside Rockville to Grafton ghost town **(x)** then back onto the 89 once more through Hurricane to the 15 S through Las Vegas (105mi; gas stop #10) and Barstow (140mi) where we turn W on the 58 to Mojave **(y)** (60mi) via the airplane storage facility at Four Corners then S onto the 14 (61mi) **(z)** to the 5, heading 8mi N to the McBean Pkwy exit where we stop off at CalArts to deposit camera, tripod and unused film stock in JB's office before walking down 2 flights of stairs to the basement where JB projects a print of the shot taken earlier in the summer from Antelope Island across Salt Lake, the cramped airless room suddenly filling with the whirr of the projector as a small (3ft × 2ft) brilliant rectangle of blues, grays, whites and blacks suddenly opens up like a window in the wall in front of where I'm sitting, the water in the lower half of the rectangle swelling and rolling beneath a sleek, unbroken surface that both mirrors and refracts the clouds, the birds that glide out first to the left then to the right from a point that seems to correspond to the dead centre of Fremont Island, hence the centre of the frame, and the low-curved outline of the Island itself suspended in the unjudgeable distance like a saucer or a sphere resting squarely on the level horizon line that precisely bisects the frame, the contours of the Island slightly blurred in a thin steam of mist; the lake comporting itself for the camera, hence for us in a singular composition in response to conditions utterly unlike those we encountered on 07/29/03; then heading back to the car park and driving N 2mi on the 5 to the 126 W before turning N after 1.5mi to JB's place in Val Verde (2mi) where I transfer my bag to the trunk of my car and drive the 2mi back to the 126, head W 25mi to the 101 then NW 30mi to Carpinteria.

—Distance: 589 mi
Dinner: chips, nuts, beef jerky, candy + sodas (1),
VERONA WATTS INTERVIEWED FOR ARTICLE ENTITELD: 'SIXES NIXED ON "DEVIL'S ROAD"', SALT LAKE CITY TRIBUNE (07/30/03):
'SOME PEOPLE LIKE TO BELIEVE IN A LOT OF

NONSENSE. A ROAD IS A ROAD. BEYOND THAT THE CHANGE IS CONFUSING.' SHE ADDED, 'TOURISTS WANT TO KNOW WHY THEY CHANGED IT FROM 666. THE PEOPLE FROM CALIFORNIA GET CONFUSED.'

Total distance: 2089mi + 20mi approx.
missed turnings, looking for motels, etc +
2mi desultory walking, etc = 2111mi

Time 'on road':
$4 \times 24 + 1 \times 14$ = 110hrs -
Time sleeping: 8×4 = 32hrs +
Time site-seeing: 4×5 = 20hrs +
Time eating/drinking: 3×5 = 15hrs +
Time watching TV in motel, etc.:
1×4 = 4hrs +
Time at gas stations, etc.:
$10 \times$ 8mins = 1hr 20min +
Beaver Pi-stop: = 0hr 40min +
TOTAL: = 73 hrs

Total time spent in motion:
110 – 73 = 37hrs
Avg rate of travel =
2111mi/37hrs = 57.054054054 mph

$r = d/t$
nb: all calculations subject to error

James Benning film locations sighted en route:

(a) *Sogobi*, shot 33 (2001): Hwy 14 with San Andreas Fault exposed;
(b) *UTOPIA* (1998) (ruins of Llano, socialist community, Pear Blossom Hwy 138);
(c) *Deseret* (1995) (tree adjacent to Mountain Meadows Monument);
(d) *El Valley Centro*, shot 14 (1999): not a location but Nora Hunt is shown tying three goats at a rodeo in Coalinga;
(e) *Deseret* (mountains, Bryce Canyon);
(f) *Deseret* ('aerial' shot of canyons from road, Escalante National Monument);
(g) *Deseret* (aspen forest, Box Hollow Wilderness);
(h) *Deseret* (Capitol Dome, Capitol Reef National Park);
(i) *Deseret* (dirt hillocks, Hwy 24);
(j) *Deseret* (Factory Butte, Hwy 24);
(k) *Four Corners*, Part 3 (1997), (Indian pictographs (colour);
(l) *Deseret* (Indian pictographs (b&w);
(m) *Deseret* (Crystal Geyser, nr Greenriver);
(n) *Deseret* (petroglyphs, Sego Cyn);
(o) *Deseret* (earth-moving equipment, Bingham Cyn Copper mine);
(p) *13 LAKES* (forthcoming [2004]; view of Fremont Island from Antelope Island, Salt Lake);

(q) *Deseret* (Brigham City neon sign, Brigham City);
(r) *Deseret* (ShopCo supermarket, Brigham City);
(s) *North on Evers* (1991; actually Commercial Jetty Gmi S Spiral Jetty);
(t) *Deseret* (red Salt Lake water adjacent to Spiral Jetty, Rozel Pt);
(u) *Deseret* (Golden Spike Monument, Promontory Pass);
(v) *Deseret* (polygamists' family homes, Colorado City);
(w) *Deseret* (mountains, Zion National Park);
(x) *Deseret* (abandoned church and house, Grafton);
(y) *Sogobi*, shot 13: billboard 'AVAILABLE', Outdoor Systems, Inc.;
(z) *Sogobi*, shot 33: Hwy 14 with San Andreas Fault exposed.

PART TWO: TRAVELOGORRHEA
(recorded in-car conversation)

Mathematics may be defined as the subject in which we never know what we are talking about, or whether what we are saying is true.
Bertrand Russell

Day one: Saturday 07/26/03

JB: I went out to 29 Palms a couple of years back to see the Douglas Gordon piece. He'd built a screen out in the desert and he was projecting *The Searchers* at a speed that would have taken 7 years to run right through. The projection started at dusk. The nice thing about it is the film plays day and night and, of course, you can't see it during the day, because it's too bright and then, as the sun sets, the image kind of fades in like a Polaroid and there's a marvelous point where the blue in the sky starts to blend in with the top of the film frame so there's this moment where the top of the screen disappears into the landscape and as it gets darker, of course, the image asserts itself and the colors get brighter and the image gets more distinct and recognizable. Each frame is on the screen for 7 ½ minutes, and because it's been digitized you don't even see any movement from one frame to the next—it just clicks ahead to the

next image and the movement is so slight that one doesn't even register the change. So it started with a close-up of John Wayne's face and Wayne was talking so I watched it for the first 2 hours which gives you only a half a second of the film and during that time his mouth moves very slightly. And after a while everybody else went off to see the Searchers projected at normal speed at the local drive-in theatre, which was part of the event. But I stayed around because I thought it was more interesting to see this and I was out there for a couple more hours and eventually it got completely dark and it was about 10 at night and I was sitting there on my own and a boy of about 11 or 12 came by and he stood around for a minute, looking up at the screen then across at me and then he asked me: 'How long have you been watching?' And I said: 'Oh, about 4 hours.' And he said: 'Aren'tcha bored?' And I said: 'No, no. Sit down and look at the screen. See that piece of dust up there in the top left-hand corner? In exactly, er, 3 minutes and 15 seconds that dust is gonna disappear.' So he sat down and he looked at the screen and as 3 minutes came I said: 'OK. Get ready', and 15 seconds later the next frame came up and the dust disappeared. And he goes: 'Oh man! That's so cool!' And he started to watch intently and he asked me: 'What's gonna happen next?' And I said: 'Well, they're up for 7 ½ minutes so what do you think is gonna change inside the frame?' And we watched a frame or two and saw how John Wayne's lips curled out a little bit more because he's talking. So after a while he started to tell me about his life and how he was into skateboarding and what he thought of school and then he got up and he did some shadow play with the piece. He got in front of the projector and put his shadow on the screen and did stuff like he began picking John Wayne's nose and after doing that for a while he came back and sat down and we watched some more and all of a sudden he'd been there a coupla hours and I said to him: 'Aren'tcha bored?' and he said: 'No way! This is great!'.

So the next day I saw Douglas Gordon and we were talking and I told him this story and he said, 'So that's your role in life—to go around making structuralists out of people'.

Day two: Sunday 07/27/03

DH: So why do you go on working in 16mm when everybody else is going digital?

JB: Well the things I don't like about digital are that it doesn't project well, you never get to handle the material. And I've been using 16mm for so long it's become integral to the way I work. Digital doesn't have the same kind of built-in limitations I'm used to that help me to create structure. When you're editing on digital you can hop around and grab footage very fast from here and there, whereas if you're working with analog and you want to get at something that's 20 feet in you have to watch or listen to that twenty feet first to get to that point so you get to know your footage so much better … You have to be clear about what you're doing with 16mm—if you're indecisive with the edit you can end up with twenty splices in a row which makes it hard to watch. I don't have that problem so much these days because I use longer takes …

DH: Was that why you developed a preference for long takes?

JB: Not really. I like the idea of focusing attention for a longer period on what's happening inside the frame. Even if there's nothing happening, say, you can't show nothing happening by looking at something for 5 seconds. It's more convincing (with regard to nothing happening) to see that the wind doesn't blow for 10 minutes than that it doesn't blow for 3 seconds …

DH: Since the mid 90s you keep coming back to Utah in your films. What is it that's so compelling for you about Utah?

JB: I came through here first in 1989 on the motorcycle trip I revisited for *North on Evers* but I really became fascinated with Utah when I began researching the history of the Mormons for *Deseret* which is the original Mormon name for the State—the original working title for the film by the way was *Angry White Men*—and then when I started coming up here and I left the 15 behind and began driving the back roads I was just amazed at how beautiful and varied the landscape is.

DH: How did you go about structuring the material for *Deseret*?

JB: *Deseret* is organized around 93 stories about Utah that appeared in the *New York Times* over a 150-year period from 1852 to 1992. They're read on to the soundtrack over shots I made during 9 trips to Utah over an 18-month period from 1992–94. […] I didn't want to establish a one-on-one text-image relationship, cutting the text to the scene. I'd jump from spring in the mountains to winter in the desert, but I had this rule that I had to include one shot that's linked directly to each story that coincides with that story as it's narrated on the soundtrack. […] So, for instance, yesterday the still I took of the tree in the field next to the Mountain Meadows Monument is one of a series of different shots that appears on the screen when you hear the report of the massacre in the film. It's the only direct visual link to the massacre site … Another

structuring rule was that the length of each shot is determined by the length of each sentence on the soundtrack. So with the earlier texts from the 1800s when the sentences are very elaborate with clauses that go on and on, the shots are longer and the pace is slower. As we come up towards the present and the language gets shorter and shorter the pace of the shots accelerates ... So in this case, the device functions to speed up the film ... I also had one extra shot to mark the end of each paragraph of text and I shrink that in-between shot by 3 frames each paragraph so whereas the first shot between paragraphs is 30 seconds long, after 90-some shots the transitional shot lasts only about 10 seconds. It became clear as I was working on *Deseret* that the film is as much about journalism and language as it is about Utah and the landscape. It's concerned with the distance between *The New York Times* and the Mormon settlers, and how that relationship changes over time. So though the Mountain Meadows Massacre took place in September (09/11/1857) it doesn't even get mentioned as news in the *Times* till November. And of course the gap closes as communication technologies develop. In the 1850s and early 60s, when the federal government was preparing to declare war on Utah, many of the stories were written by people who weren't living here, just passing through. They're based on anti-Mormon prejudice. There's a story from the *Times* I use for instance, about the Mormons holding slaves which is false. Today the physical distance is still there, of course, but it doesn't have the same effects or the same meanings ... Utah today is totally integrated into America, at least economically. In many ways it's the model corporate capitalist state: it's conservative ... patriarchal ... very orderly. It's prospered from mining, the chemical industry ... finance ... weapons development ... and in the last 10 years or so, from nature tourism. It's got suburban sprawl all down the 15 corridor ... *Deseret*'s structure was composed to deal with all those historical issues and, I think, it works ... .

DH: I only saw *Deseret* once and I thought I was paying attention but I wasn't conscious of the shot-to-sentence ratio. Does that matter?

JB: When I use a strict structure it takes people a long time to get things that seem kind of obvious to me, not just because I was the one who made the film and so pretty much know it inside out, but because they're not used to thinking in those terms when they're watching a film. The main purpose in setting up rules for me is it helps me form a structure.

Day three: Monday 07/28/03

DH: When you first see [the pictographs at Horseshoe Cyn] from the trail they look like a crowd of shadow-people lined up in front of the canyon wall ... At first it appeared to me like they'd all been drawn around the same time, from a single point of view ... It's only when you get closer that you see they've been drawn in completely different styles to completely different scales ... [inaudible] ... at intervals across thousands of years ... So instead of being a more-or-less flat continuous surface the canyon wall suddenly sort of opens up ... becomes almost animate ... [inaudible] ... a giant teeming palimpsest ... You're aware of this vast continuity over time in terms of the sacred status of the place itself ... a line of people stretching back through the millennia ... dressed differently, maybe even different heights ... from vastly different times, and cultures ... with quite separate and distinct cosmologies ... all of them drawn to this wall and to this act of making marks on the face of the rock ... and you can trace all these modulations and sudden breaks from one epoch to the next ... You're struck by the presence of all that density and depth in time projected on a two-dimensional surface ...

JB: That's what drew me to the petroglyphs and pictographs for *Deseret*. The *New York Times* prints all these accounts about what's happening in Utah but there are all these other forms of writing on the land itself ... abandoned industrial landscapes ... early Mormon ruins ... the giant earthwork of the (Bingham Cyn) copper mine ... . All these other histories that are littering the landscape and telling you things about the past. And they're speaking as clearly as the wall paintings and the petroglyphs do. They're not as old, of course, but they talk directly about the work, the process of adapting to this land the same way the petroglyphs and pictographs talk about hunting or trading, inventories, accounts. When I first saw these paintings it was like catching arrested movement with the camera—8,000 years of human history all concentrated in one place in one frame ... . So, they have a kind of presence that speaks directly to me and to the art practice I'm into today: trying to discover (uncover?) things in my own life and I think that's what they're doing when they're painting stuff—trying to define their own lives spiritually.

DH: So does the term 'witness' fit more closely with what you're trying to do in this work than a term like, say, 'observe' or 'document' or 'create' or 'experiment'?

JB: I think I'm constantly a witness. I think that's what distinguishes good art from mediocre

art—a good artist is someone who has the discipline to look and listen and that's why last year at CalArts I decided that rather than try to design an environment in which students get to make their art, I'd try to teach them how to be artists and I thought the way to do that was to start at this really basic level—teaching them how to look and listen so they can develop the discipline to experience time differently, so they really take time to look at things.

DH: How did you go about doing that?

JB: Well it was a lot like our trip. I took them to places I knew and most of those places are places I've filmed in so we went to a large oil field in the Central Valley, the top of a mountain in the Sierras, a homeless encampment in downtown LA, the docks at San Pedro, Trona, the chemical town in the Mojave desert. They rode local buses for a day. They rode the Metro to downtown LA. I told them they couldn't bring tape recorders or cameras so that they wouldn't be thinking about how to translate what they were seeing and hearing into some other medium. So there were no assignments for them to make work. They were simply asked to be aware of what they were seeing and hearing so that they could have something to say about the experience to the group every month and at the end of the semester we talked about how the course had affected the way they looked and listened …

DH: Was it successful?

JB: […] In the past I've had students who liked what I do but I've never had them moved by the experience because before they were always being moved by their own experience—they'd be working out of their own concerns. But this was redefining the whole concept of place and how they could relate to it as individuals and as artists … [As we drive through a bend in the road] This is the town of Helper … it's where the railroad goes up a gradient so they had to provide extra engines to help pull the freight up through the valley …

Day four: Tuesday 07/29/03

DH: So here's the passage where Smithson describes how he came across the site (reading aloud):

> *An expanse of salt flats bordered the lake, and caught in its sediments were countless bits of wreckage […] this site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes […] About one mile north of the oil seeps I selected my site […] Under shallow pinkish water is a network of mud cracks supporting the jigsaw puzzle that composes the salt flats. As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape seem to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and non-site whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other. It was as if the mainland oscillated with waves and pulsations, and the lake remained rock still. The shore of the lake became the edge of the sun, a boiling curve, an explosion rising into a fiery prominence. Matter collapsing into the lake mirrored in the shape of a spiral. No sense wondering about classification and categories, there were none …* [2]

And here's you in *North on Evers* retracing the trip you made to *Spiral Jetty* in 1989 (reading out loud):

> *The next day I decided to look for the Spiral Jetty, built in 1970 by Robert Smithson. I remembered that it was somewhere off Rozel Point in Great Salt Lake. Smithson described the salt flats in his writings. Caught in their sediments were countless bits of wreckage. He said that the site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes. I went down small gravel roads trying to find Rozel Point, but they either turned the wrong way or disappeared into wheat fields. After four hours I finally found a series of private roads that led towards the lake. The last road was chained off. I parked and walked the last three miles. The Spiral Jetty is a 1500-foot coil, 15 feet wide. I couldn't see it anywhere. Then I found it two feet under water. The lake had risen since it was built. I walked the spiral to its end. I stood there in the salt water. There was no one in any direction. Salt crystals cut at my feet.*
>
> *I suppose, in a way, my trip ended there at the end of the spiral. I stared into space. A kind of dizziness overtook my body. I was hot and dehydrated. I had no water. I thought about the secrets of survival that were shared by the desert life around me. For a brief moment I thought this to be the end, that I would quietly succumb to my desolation.*
>
> *I walked slowly back under a scorching sun …*[3]

2) Robert Smithson, in Jack Flam (ed.), *The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 146.

3) James Benning, "*North On Evers*," in James Benning, *Fifty Years to Life: Texts from Eight Films by James Benning* (Madison: Two Pants Press, 2000), pp. 158–159.

JB: Yeah. And when I got back to where I'd left my bike the starter motor was acting up and I knew I'd never be able to get up enough speed for a running start in all that sand. I thought I was going to die …

DH: Like us the other day in Horseshoe Canyon when we lost the trail for a while and were almost out of water …

JB: Yeah … except that time I didn't bring any water. I was so excited at finally getting to see the Jetty it wasn't till I got there I could suddenly see how hot it was. And it was under water so it took me a long time to find the outline of the structure … and when I came back to film *North on Evers* it was still under water, not exposed like it was today … When I came back I realized straightaway it wasn't even the Spiral Jetty I'd walked along the first time but the commercial jetty … you saw how it goes way, way out into the lake and then kind of curves a little at the end.

DH: So you keep getting drawn back into the spiral.

JB: … [inaudible] … the Spiral Jetty turns up three times in *Deseret*. When it gets noted in 1970 in the *New York Times*, instead of the Jetty you see the reddish water at Rozel Point but I've already included a shot of the jetty earlier in the film as a kind of foreshadowing … . the second part of *Deseret*, which is in color, folds back on the first (b&w) half. It sort of spirals in on itself. And that exposes the structure of the film: the way it speeds up as the language gets shorter like the spirals of the jetty getting shorter and shorter as they curl in towards the centre …

DH: So is the Spiral Jetty a key to that film or is it the key to all your films?

JB: Especially that film, but maybe it's the key to all of them … Of course the Spiral Smithson made isn't the Golden Spiral which is what you find in nature—in salt crystals and sea shells—because you can't even draw that, let alone build it as a jetty 15-feet wide because a line—any line—is too thick which is why in physics and math a line doesn't have any thickness—you have to think of a line as a series of points that are dimensionless. The Golden Spiral fits into the Golden Rectangle because it's a series of quarter circles with the radius of each quarter getting smaller and smaller. So the spiral is actually a quarter circle that fits into a quadrant of the Rectangle … then you fit another circle under that, but with a smaller radius, and another under that one, and so on, and so on to infinity, and the radius decreases by the same percentage every time and that percentage is part of the Golden Mean. The Golden Mean is 1.618033988749894 dot dot dot, and the radius of the spiral reduces by point 6180339 dot dot dot, that's approximately a 62% reduction each time as the radius gets smaller and smaller and … [end of tape].

Day five: Wednesday 07/30/03

JB: […] I think that montage cutting came out of a need to manipulate time, to condense time yet also to extend it … but in the end what I'd like to think is it really came from a fear of boredom. At this stage in my work, I'm more interested in conveying what happens in a frame in a place over a particular period of time. The shot of the tree in the fog in *Sogobi* (shot 16, blue oak, Temblor Range, Los Padres National Forest), where there's no movement whatsoever, goes very fast for me. I used to think the way you perceive time is a function of how much movement there is in the shot but maybe it's really a function of pleasure … It's a question of scale—a scale of time—like when we were coming back through Horseshoe Canyon and we got so dehydrated and it was taking so long, we couldn't judge how far away the canyon wall was, or how far it was back to the car …

DH: I couldn't see … the sun block was stinging my eyes so much I could barely see my hand held out in front of me … I come all this way to see these pictographs and I'm reeling … stumbling around like a blind man with a stick squinting sideways through one eye up the cliff face … and then [when] I saw them ……….
……………………………………………

JB: Distance is a function of time … d = rt (distance = rate × time) ……………………
……………………………………………
(PERSONAL STUFF)…………………………
……………………………………………
……. (SILENCE) …. (OTHER STUFF: see below)

Other Topics Discussed in Car: childhood memories … trauma … sex … (death) … drugs … (death) … love … Bob Dylan … Lucinda Williams … Julie Christie … Mose Tolliver … Bill Traylor … Michael Snow … Willem Dafoe … Nancy Holt … *Goshogaoka* … the Cuban revolution … (death) … diaries … self-disclosure … puzzles … proofs … the number 13 … prime numbers … asymmetery … guilt … desire … (death) … promiscuity … monogamy … polygamy … celibacy … prison … possum hunting … *The Beaver Trilogy* … Antonioni … Polanski … (death) … Ed Gein … Medgar Evers … Laurie Bembenek … Arthur Bremer … architecture … early TV … 'adult' vs. 'senior' as categories e.g. 'adult book store' vs. 'senior-gated community' … solipsism … solitude … housing …

PART THREE: TRAVAILOGUE

This is the town of Helper where the railroad goes up a gradient so they had to provide extra engines to help pull the freight up through the valley. Joe Louis had a training camp in the 30s in the mountains up there above the town ... I photographed the old brick buildings ... they were originally the homes of hard rock miners ...
James Benning

Day after: Thursday 07/31/03

watch: *vt* About 1200 *wacchen* developed from O.E *waeccan* keep watch, be awake-*n* Before 1200 *waecce* a watching, vigil from *waeccan* to watch. The meaning of small timepiece (1588) is related to that of a clock to wake up sleepers (1448). (Oxford Dictionary of Etymology)

In November 2002 a three-man camera crew headed by Reinhard Wulf (camera: Jürgen Behrens; sound: Günter Kunze) followed JB on a road trip from Val Verde to Utah shooting footage for an 83min 56sec documentary on his work entitled *Circling the Image*. The documentary aired in January of this year on Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR TV) in Germany (estimated number of households reached: 100, 000). I put the video JB handed to me as I was about to leave his place last night into the VHS machine and watch.

I watch as JB opens the door of the 68 Nova (not the vehicle I've just spent 30-some hours in) and sets off once more along many of the same roads we've just been on (Hwys 12, 14, 24, 58, 138). Having traveled this route in the first person (singular and plural) I now get to do it all over again, one day later, this time in the third, although the filmic syntax unfolds without the 'series of standstills' (Robert Smithson)—Mountain Meadows, Horseshoe Cyn, Bingham Cyn, Copper Mine, Antelope Island, Spiral Jetty—that punctuated (structured) the sequence traced out on our trip in Parts I and II. Then, just S of Hanksville, the two itineraries diverge: the camera crew heads S down the 95 in the direction of Lake Powell.

JB is about to make a shot for 13 *LAKES* (13 × 10 = 130min; forthcoming [2004]).

On the video I watch JB looking down through railings sunk into a concrete bulwark adjacent to a busy highway at an expanse of water as, via voice-over, he explains that Lake Powell (with a shoreline longer than the California coast) sits in a canyon filled with water diverted for irrigation and electricity-generating purposes from the Colorado River. I watch him setting up the camera on its tripod which is balanced precariously on a low spur of rock jutting out into the lake—light dancing on its agitated surface, mountains in the distance. JB looks through the viewfinder then strides off as soon as the camera starts to roll to crouch on a rock about 10 feet away. Framed in medium-long shot, he appears completely preoccupied yet utterly present and focused on the scene, turned in upon himself with that disconcerting inwardness blind people evince when the sighted encounter them unexpectedly on a busy sidewalk and, mortified at the prospect of collision with something so monstrous, step smartly aside—horrified, ashamed, apologetic—as the blind crash forward ineluctably in a straight line through the invisible light slashing the air in an arc left and right with a stick. JB cups his ears in a gesture I have seen many times in the past five days, his signature gesture every time he undertakes an audit of a site—only this time his hands are cupped over headphones attached to the Nagra reel-to-reel he's used on every film-shoot since 1971.

We see the finished shot. We see how, almost immediately as JB steps away from the camera, a large white tour boat, its presence masked till now by a dark rock outcropping on the right, suddenly powers across the shot from right to left. The remainder of the shot documents the trauma following this white incision along the horizon-line, as the light crashes in at all angles past the scudding clouds, colliding with a heaving wake that appears to be converging directly on the camera. The lapping on the soundtrack approaches hurricane-tossed-sea proportions. We pull back to the German crew's camera position again as JB hops from rock to rock, at times almost ankle deep in water, as he methodically sets about averting one small disaster after the next, orchestrating order out of chaos—lifting the boom just in time out of the path of an impending wave with one hand, steadying the tripod with the other. He somehow contrives to remain implausibly, implacably composed throughout, *as if he had expected this to happen* ... like an actor deadpanning through some slapstick Armageddon in a silent comedy ... as if Buster Keaton were suddenly to burst out of the gate on the back of a bull at the Panguitch rodeo and, against all odds and every law of physics, stay upright and aloft for a full 10 minutes:

JB (voice over): I find the frame and I turn the camera on and I hope the light is going to change within the shot ... at (the optimum) rate ... and that I'll be able to capture that. I'm never quite sure what the timing will be. And I'm not sure if a boat's going to come or if something's

going to occur or a plane's going to fly over. When you study things and really work hard and keep working and putting your camera in certain places, eventually those things happen. It's because of hard work not because of the fortuitous nature of it ... I think you set up situations to capture the fortuitous.[4]

The paradox of framing in advance by dint of labor, the unforeseen event lies at the heart of what is at once most rigorous and, in a quite literal sense, most magical about JB's practice (as if magic were not itself the very fruit and episteme of the rigorously trained focus). I cannot, for instance, explain how it came to pass that precisely half way through *Reeling In Utah* in the late morning of our third day on the road, just as JB was explaining how cathexis onto place can lead to a refinement of the Self (i.e. to ego loss), as he concluded his description of a class he'd taught the previous semester at CalArts devoted to facilitating the development of mindfulness in students, we should, at that very moment, be driving past a town that just happens to be named Helper.

No doubt a single word—'uncanny'—will square away all loose ends for those who, like myself, seem constitutionally incapable of following even the simplest demonstration of probability theory just as citations from the medical literature on the effects of dehydration and sunstroke could probably explain away to the satisfaction of most readers the weird synchronicities and sensory distortions that played back and forth between JB and me as we walked across the sand that afternoon threading our way between the creosote bushes and the sagebrush in the long defunct *arroyo* at the base of Horseshoe Canyon the preceding day. At one point I lay on a boulder in the shadow of a vast cathedral-like concave hollow in the rock that JB, on an earlier visit, had, in deference to its resonant qualities, dubbed 'the Ear', holding a conversation without raising my voice with JB who sat on a rock 100 yards farther down the trail. And later, as I saw the painted figures moving through the cliff face and the rock 'support' itself appeared to come to life, I felt a sudden gust of hot moist air upon my face and remarked to JB on the return hike that I kept thinking I could smell in the air around me human breath (he said to him it smelled more like the breath of a cat) as we walked slowly in the blistering stillness back up towards the mouth of the canyon.

4) Reinhard Wulf (dir), *James Benning: Circling the Image* (Germany 2003, produced by WDR—Westdeutscher Rundfunk). All other James Benning quotes in Part Three of text are from recorded in-car conversations with JB for "Reeling in Utah" unless otherwise indicated.

But these fortuities hardly came from nowhere. They proceeded like the mining/railroad town of Helper itself and the pictographs in Horseshoe Canyon, as JB puts it, from particular histories, as the products of the concentrated application, sustained over time, of human energy and labor, including most immediately and most poignantly with regard to the fortuitous effects just cited, JB's own prodigious investment in the production through hard labor and strictly rule-bound play of intense and troubling Truth (from OE *treowth*: faithful, constant), his unrelenting dedication to his project.

The uncanniness that infuses so much of JB's work is nothing more (though also nothing less) than the materialized by-product (the 'pay-off' one might say) of a logically derived, meticulously crafted system operating at optimum efficiency and to maximum effect on a thoroughly researched field, precisely marked-out in advance. (**JB**: 'I don't think of the camera as an extension of my eye. I don't have that kind of romance with the camera. I use it as a precise tool.') the puzzles, keys, numerical convenors and other organizing devices secreted in plain view bind shot to shot and embed the diegesis in the individual frame while securing the viewer's collaboration in the work of composition (finding the whole within each part) through a hermeneutics that brings divination (the associative leap) and reverse engineering (counting/timing shots) into a complex but harmonious alignment. (**JB**: 'I want the audience to be proactive, to participate in the making of meaning.') And JB's spiritual materialism brings him into a similarly ordered alignment with that esoteric tradition within mathematics and structuralism that pulls figures as dissimilar as Pythagoras and Robert Smithson (and e.g. Godel, Escher, Bach, CS Peirce, Saussure [the Saussure, at least, of the acrostics and the anagrams]) into the 'gyrating space' (Smithson) where formal logic's logic fails to hold: the primes, the 'irrational' numbers, incompletion, what Smithson calls the 'surd', the entropic principle toward which so much of Smithson's work, and most spectacularly *Spiral Jetty*, was ostensibly directed.

Truth capitalized a second time, unmarked, hence less contentious when positioned at the opening of a sentence (an iteration that underscores the primacy of syntax in the ordering of things; the arranging in a sequence, the assumption of command) circles back upon itself in the figure of the *Ouroboros;* the snake devouring its own tail, another variation on the Golden Spiral spinning ever outwards like the rapacious, neatly terraced abyss of the Bingham

Canyon Copper Mine that turns also at the same time in the opposite direction back and down and inwards to the source), the letter K for 'Kennecott', the astral number 7 (the marks of ownership inserted by the self-appointed Lords of Earth and Outer Space—the copper mining corporation ... the 'original' team of US astronauts) in the circle at the centre of the *ankh*, for instance.[5]

The empty spool picks up the leader as the mechanism snaps into position and the film snakes backwards through the gate.

5) For an insightful discussion of the pertinence of this figure for Smithson and the *Spiral Jetty* see Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 27. Shapiro points out that Smithson's first essay for *Artforum* (1966) begins with a quotation from Eric Temple Bell's *Time Stream*, a novel built around 'images of entropy, ruins, cosmic disorder, eternal recurrence (...). Bell's characters puzzle about the meaning of an ancestral symbol inscribed on the ceiling of their most significant building. It is a snake that forms a circle with its own tail in its mouth (ouroboros). They gradually come to see that symbol and its motto "the whole is one" refer to the cyclical structure of time.' Eric Temple Bell, *The Time Stream* (Rhode Island/New York: Buffalo Book Co & GHE, 1946), p. 40.

6) The last sentence of this quote is taken from an interview with James Benning conducted by D.-L. Alvarez, "Tortured Landscapes: James Benning's 'California Trilogy' takes a long hard look at our backyard," in *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film*, June 3, 2002, www.filmmakermagazine.com/archives/online features/tortured landscapes.html

JB: I chose 2½ minutes as the shot length for the 'California Trilogy' because that's the duration of 100ft of 16mm film so the material dictated the length of the shots. A roll is actually 2mins and 47secs and that allowed me to slide the shots. I could either cut the tail or head, and adjust the timing slightly. 35 shots × 2½ = 87½mins. And that leaves 2½mins exactly for the credits. I was interested in seeing what activities take place in that 2½mins time period ... It's the time it takes a rodeo champion to tie up 3 goats, a cotton-picker to traverse half a field and an empty goods train to pass straight through the shot.[6]

8½ × 11, 11 × 14, 13 × 10, 35 × 2½: ... the running of the numbers as they pass beneath the gate, the murmur of the measure that runs back against the this-then-this-then-this of forward-facing narrative declensions is the unifying factor in all of JB's work. It is the signature that binds together the early narrative experiments (e.g. *8½ × 11* [1974], *11 × 14* [1976]) to the non-fiction noirs (e.g. *Landscape Suicide* [1986], *Used Innocence* [1988]) to the masculine confessionals and auto-bio essays (e.g. *American Dreams* [1984], *North On Evers* [1991]) to the lengthy cycle of landscape/place portrait films (*Deseret*, *Four Corners*, *UTOPIA*, 'California Trilogy', *13 LAKES*).

Like a journeyman carpenter, a skilled craftsman in an age of prefabricated furniture, JB is at home when working on the road, carrying his own tools to the site (camera, tripod, audio recorder, reading glasses, watch), building each project 'on the plank' (as they used to say in the London furniture trade) out of raw local timber (the travel logs): the meticulous research squared away out of sight (the frame around the frame) in the quiet execution of the piece.

But this analogy, of course, like all analogies, is productive only to a point: a film, after all, is not a piece of furniture, its utility is less immediately apparent ... and the journeyman carpenter, unlike the migrant field worker, is today a rare, archaic specimen, a residual trace left over from another epoch. Throughout the process of production, number functions in JB's obsessive and ceaselessly inventive time-based calculations as the medium for a mind idling in neutral when the rest of the world is compelled at every turn to get in gear and get straight back to work.

In the hunt for origins and early influences bearing down on JB's oeuvre, critics and reviewers through the years have cited *inter alia* North American experimental filmmakers (Brakhage, Warhol, Snow), non-US art-house filmmakers (Antonioni, Ozu) and painters (Edward Hopper, Mondrian, Johns). One neglected candidate for the title of Prime Mover in this regard is the drill press, the machine JB operated when he worked for 9 months in a factory in Milwaukee in 1963 before graduating with a BSc in mathematics from the University of Wisconsin a few years later. As with many of JB's films, I have never seen *Time and a Half* (1972), but by JB's own account it is a conventional narrative short (17 mins long) with a single actor recapitulating JB's role in the same factory 8 years later:

> *What I remember of working as a drill-press operator is that it was boring and the speed of the machine regulated you. You'd get bored and try to daydream but the lengths of the daydreams were dictated by the machine. It's dangerous—if you stick your hand in at the wrong time you put a drill through it. So you have to have short thoughts and get back to work. I put that in the film ...*[7]

'[S]hort thoughts', like 60 × 60 second shots (the structure of *One Way Boogie Woogie* [1977], JB's more famous Milwaukee smokestack film). The length of the shots in JB's work increases expo-

7) Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 230.

nentially in direct ratio to his distance from the drill-press bench. (JB: Maybe my next film will be one 24-hour shot). 'Time-and-a-half' is, of course, the designation of an overtime rate: a brutal reminder of the calculated value of a human life (with an additional 0.5 ['double time'] available in some cases for those prepared to work public holidays):

> *My pay was $1.66666 ... per hour with time-and-a-half for anything over 40 hours. Since I worked 55 hours a week that is 10 hours a day Monday through Friday and five hours on Saturday, in the winter months I only saw the sun on Saturday afternoons and Sundays.*
> *My pay was:*

40 hours @ $1.6666 ...	*= $66.66666666 ...*
15 hours @ $2.50	*= $37. 50*
TOTAL	*= $104.1666666 ...*

> *Which, rounded off to $104.67 gross pay with 20% withheld for taxes, leaves my take-home pay for 55 hours at $83.33.*[8]

Time-and-a-half = a reminder, too, that in the factory, as in the prison (see James Benning, *Fifty Years To Life. Texts from Eight Films* [Madison, WI: Two Pants Press, 2000]; and, especially, *Used Innocence*), the (wandering) Mind can prove a dangerous liability, can put a drill bit through a hand, that you are here to 'do' your time (not 'spend' it), that every day counts (against you).

> *... I just drifted. Running from a storm or toward some desire. Perhaps in a desperate attempt to outdistance my anxiety or to deny the murmur of advancing age.*[9]

8) Email, 10:07am, Tuesday 19, August 2003.

9) James Benning, "*North On Evers*," pp. 151–152.

POST-SCRIPT: ABANDONED HOPES (MACHINE LANGUAGE)

I spend the evening jotting down recollected scenes from/for "Reeling in Utah:"

Spiral Jetty

Arrive at SJ around 8:45 am. Jetty now fully exposed—pure-white salt-like snow spiral in Alaska. 2 guys + 1 girl in SUV right behind us. While JB gets camera, tripod, etc., I watch as the 2 guys strip naked & walk to end of Jetty. Girl photographs. Tells me 1 guy is her brother & is studying Art in NYC. They leave. JB and I take photos of each other as RS walking on Jetty though have to switch from southern edge of outer loop to northern due to position of sun + wind on water. Take more photos using disposable panoramic. 1hr later 2 more visitors + cameras. JB says he's always been alone at SJ before. Dia effect? At current rate roads to SJ will be backed up to Hwy 15 in 1yr.

Hurricane

No bars in town & no restaurant open so eat pizza + bottle of Mesquite wine in motel rm. Watch bad TV doc on Cuba. Discuss collab. project + JB: Cuba 59 – 59 × 59sec shots of Cuba. JB says shot lgth shd. be at least 3 mins.

Colorado City

C City on Utah/Arizona border: polygamyville. Big unfinished houses + piles of kids' bikes in yards. Boys in shop-bought clothes. Girls in homemade Victorian dresses. Sml sad zoo + biblical animals (camels etc.). Go to breakfast place. Women 1 sde, men the other. X Files episode. Beautiful woman + no makeup, 19th C floor-lgth dress serves JB: 'How many ml is it to Kanab [next town]?' Woman: 'I really wouldn't know.' JB: 'Any idea how long it wd take to drive?' Woman: 'I'm afraid I don't have much call to go there.'

Kanab

Gas stop in Kanab. Blackboard + chalk in men's restroom. I draw the SJ on right hand side. Doesn't look bad though am struck by resemblance to Figure 2. Sit in car. JB emerges from restroom. Says my spiral reminded him of a #2 and so wrote the proof of the square root of 2 which leads to an irrational # on left-hand side of blackboard. ('A number 2?' I say, 'So you think my drawing's shit?'). Regret now not going back in to take photo.

Next I review notes, aphorisms, etc. I've scribbled in the margins of old newspapers and on the white spaces in ads torn from tourist bumph

in four Utah motel rooms on four successive nights in the 5min aperture between TV and ZZ. E.g.:

'(Bracket all reduction): nothing worth saying can be stated directly ... '

'Restricted access = JB's ethos—hard-to-get-to places, hard-to-access work; hard to see (distribution); hard to screen (16mm!); hard to watch (demanding).'

'Rozel Pt = a lake + a spiral in it'

'Bingham Cyn Copper Mine = a spiral + a lake in it (sump pond at base)

'(illegible) drawing/being drawn ... taking a line for a drive as well as a walk (though not a line of flight—it's vital to stay grounded especially (illegible) ... '

They have all the doughy brilliance of those adolescent apercus jotted down at midnight in the wake of one's first joint. It's like trying to decipher the machine language inside your own laptop ...

A thing is a hole in a thing it is not. Carl Andre

I crumple up the papers in a ball and throw them in the trash.

TAIL (THE END)

CREDITS
Directed by .... James Benning
Written by .... Dick Hebdige
Produced by .... *Afterall* Journal
Choreographed by.............. James Benning
Location finder.................. James Benning
Stills .... James Benning
Dick Hebdige

CAST
James Benning.................. JB
Dick Hebdige.................... DH

Amanda Yates

Looking and Listening

In a basement classroom of CalArts, students splayed out on the carpet wearing jeans, Vans, 80s style pumps, and rock n' roll T-shirts, many of us still shaking off our hangover, and James Benning began our first class of "Looking and Listening" by asking each of us to describe our childhood kitchen. When I signed up for the class I was in my third year of two concurrent MFA degrees, one in film and one in writing, and I was desperately confused about everything. Constant noise in my mind created angry work. Like my life, my work was full of drama, conflict, and complicated narratives—in short, it was as far away from James' work as you could get. James wanted us to describe our childhood kitchens materially, not how we felt about them, what we *thought* was amusing, or a dramatic story that took place there; he wanted us to leave our narratives at the door. He wanted to know our kitchen's color and shape, sounds and materials, things like:

Elf figurines hanging from light fixtures
Missing doorknobs
A Grandmother speaking German
Soot-stained William Morris Wallpaper
Smell of Velveeta
Gum under the kitchen table
Frogs in the sink
Melancholy Victorian light reflecting off the greenery of the back garden ...

Every so often James would interrupt us: "Do you *actually* remember the character of the light, or was that your imagination filling in the gaps? Is this a dramatic representation or is it your real memory?" This class was all about the real, no fiction, and above all, no drama. So the question for me then, as I was sitting there trying to remember my childhood without anger, regret, or nostalgia, was whether or not I even wanted to come over to James' side. Part of me was enjoying being messy, somewhere I longed for the narrative that could grab me by the throat and insist on my attention, bring me into full focus and make me forget about my life. Though I respected James' position, I never was fully seduced by his cool, structuralist worldview; I willfully resisted abandoning my dramatic narrative ways. For the duration of the class, my mind ruthlessly battled the landscapes we entered. It's not easy to get your mind quiet enough to really pay attention to the world around you. And, if anything, my work after his class has become more dramatic, more narrative, more personal, but if I'm honest, it has become a thousand times better. It is only now looking back that I realize what a profound

impact James had on my work. He taught me to see that the world offered greater possibilities than those concocted by my cramped ideologies. The magic elixir he fed my work had the transformative power of expansion, invoking breath and life through the most basic observational exercises. He helped me untangle the morass of narratives that clogged some of my graduate work by asking: What happens if you just look and don't add anything? What if you don't try to sell anything, even your beliefs? What if the story is already there in the environment?

One of James' first requests for the class was that we never bring a camera or a journal. No recording devices at all. He wanted us to look, listen, smell and taste (there was many a horrible restaurant to be sampled in this class. For example, my personal favorite was The Chowder Barge at San Pedro docks where a cold, salty, clam infested brine put half the class out sick and was served by a feisty yet senile waitress who took our order fifteen times and still managed to get it completely wrong). With a camera in our hands, we would always already be constructing, even if we weren't shooting film. We'd always be asking ourselves how to frame something, how to describe it, we'd be editorializing rather than observing. For fledgling artists it is so tempting to run in and "say something!" before one even gets the chance to understand what's going on. James wasn't necessarily advocating a neutral image—a neutral image probably isn't even possible; instead James was asking us to see beyond our I, to allow the veil of narrative imposition to fall from our eyes, and see reality bare in all its splendor. By paying close attention to the specific, our work could then touch on the universal. Our first assignment was to spend a few hours, alone, wandering the halls of CalArts—a place most of us had lived in, produced work in, slept, drank, partied and passed out in for several years. Through his instruction the school was transformed into a virgin environment, a new continent of arresting sensual experience.

I had walked the dreary warren-like hallways of CalArts a thousand times. For me they were simply a way to schlep from point A to point B. They could be overwhelming, wallpapered with posters advertising everything from punk shows to cameras to anti-racism rallies, crowded with people I wanted to talk to or was trying to avoid. Ugly. Windowless. But something changed when I spent a few hours just 'seeing' them, the walls of CalArts transformed into a living tissue.

There is a staircase that opens into a hallway behind the theater school super-shop. If you are quiet, that hallway will speak to you. The lights will hum and the air will glow fluorescent green, water will shiver down the wall pipes, laughing, stomping and cussing will echo in from every corner. Like all organisms, CalArts is constantly changing. Tomorrow the lights might be broken and the hallway swamped in darkness. Graffiti will appear and then be covered over with more graffiti. The floor will be smeared and the air thick with the smell of ketchup and French fries.

Following James' suggestion, I walk out the front entrance of CalArts and cross the freeway by foot on the overpass. I've never made this walk before, usually I drive. Sun blares white off man-made objects. Even the trees shoved in their planter boxes look man-made. There are carefully manicured lawns, green and empty. There are no humans to be seen. Empty street. Airplane hum. Trail of white jet propulsion across the white radiated sky. I walk past a small park. There is a bench where all the people who never walk can rest. Behind the bench, a small statue of an angel hovers over a memorial plaque dedicated to a deceased child. Plastic flowers lie at the altar, something one would never see or notice just driving by. A huge fountain gushes water from slab to slab, slaps of water welcome me into the cement heart of what was once desert chaparral. From beyond the maze of suburban houses, the Californian hills' low whispers are drowned by the sound of a lawn mower, ratcheting cement cracker, someone behind a fence draining a pool, or doing something to a pool. For a long time I see only the evidence people have left behind, no flesh—but slowly, as my attention draws to a sharper focus, people appear. Mexican workers slipping from work-truck to backyard, crouching on the other side of a bush, digging in clay, shoveling dried grass. In this designed community, all the houses are in one of four models. As it nears four o'clock, the streets are still empty. I see a playground. I can't imagine any children ever playing on this playground. The entire street is empty. The playground is plastic and brightly colored, far too hot to touch in the desert sun. Who would let their children play here? The clack of swing chains seems an invitation to abduction.

Suburbia marks a popular subject for both artists and art students alike: the homogenization of culture, the excess and waste, the isolation, alienation, and consumerist ideology all literalized through the landscape. Whether they are able to articulate it or not, it seems that

most people who live in our culture recognize the themes of suburbia. Art students in particular visit those tropes again and again; the zombie film, for example, is a reccurring motif at CalArts—films, literary works and paintings illustrate the zombies' mindless wandering through suburban streets and shopping malls with vacant stares and hungry gaping maws, the need to consume making up their very essence. The aim of these works is to translate vague concepts like 'alienation' into something that adds to the dialogue about American culture. But often these fledgling observations about suburbia only touch on the obvious—regurgitating what we think we know, compositing our memories to create works that, like zombies, are soulless, not-quite-accurate representations of the real thing. In "Looking and Listening" James recommends a magic that can bring even dullest gray matter back to life—specificity. His prescription demands we stop theorizing about suburbia from our studio and actually go there. Stay there for a while. Pay attention. Strip away all the frosting layered on by pop culture and personal history and see what's really there: the Crayola colors of the empty plastic playground made from a material that burns you when you touch it; the fountain gushing stolen water through the desert, though no one is there to enjoy it; the child's memorial hidden on a strip of roadside grass. It's through the details that the heart of the subject will reveal itself.

~

Next Thursday we arrive in front of the school at four a.m., it's still dark. Still groggy with sleep we pile into as few cars as possible and drive until there are no signs of civilization. When we arrive at the site it doesn't feel cold as we expected, many of us leave the blankets we were instructed to bring in the car so we don't have to carry them. Then we head single file up a small mountain. We are spread far enough apart to be just out of earshot of one another as we ascend. Feeling my way slowly so as not to trip I listen to the sound of my breath, the air is getting colder, my chin becomes numb. Soft dust trail. Smell of sage and juniper.

We arrive at the top. Gathering us together, James whispers to find a place where we feel comfortable sitting for a while. The figures of my classmates disappear into the velvet shrubs as I settle down on my own patch of dirt. Starlight seeps through the dark until the sky is saturated, a satellite appears and swiftly glides past the Milky Way. In the hills below the lone headlights of a car snake through the wilds,

disappear around a bend. As the color of the sky subtly lifts I see now that lichen-covered rocks surround me. I am on the edge of a cliff. It doesn't look too steep. I bet I could climb down (later I realize that it was a twenty foot drop straight down onto sharp rock). But a chill wind comes up suddenly, seeping up from the basin of the valley, descending from the deep cloudless sky, I stay put. The wind curls under my clothes and lifts my hair, my frozen fingers can barely bend. I curl into a ball and try not to move. I want to stay exactly where my body heat has warmed the ground. Tucking my hands into my pants I hug my legs to my chest and try to hold out looking at the scenery around me. Eventually I give in and pull my head into my shirt until only my ears poke out—for the moment this class is re-titled "Listening and Freezing." Rolled into a ball with my head tucked in and my eyes closed tight it's easy to disappear into my own thoughts. Loud thoughts. Relationship drama. Financial worries. Until I realize I am inside a hush. The terrain is cloaked in quiet. Then birdsong. I re-emerge to find that the sky has turned pink. I sit up. We are in the middle of a small mountain range. Things are happening fast. The moon sets as the sun rises. I blink and the sky is a different color, shifting quickly from pink to gray, flashes of dust and indigo, gold singes across the valley following wave after wave of shadow. Night ends. But when? At what point exactly do things end? Is this book in your hands still part of that night? The landscape filtering through me onto this page as a small shard of mountain dust propelled forward, to grow, to be devoured, to rot away again. The narratives of the land and the narratives of our bodies are one: scars, billboards, sage brush, satellite, gun shot, broken heart, crooked nose, mountain range, river valley, bones, blood, memory.

~

The idea for this essay came after one of these classes when I was sitting in the school café with James and musing about my observations. I told him that I thought his classes were his "real" work, and that his films were just documentations of his process. James laughed and thought about it for a while, then said, "Yeah, I think so too." James' work is about participation in the material world. In the case of "Looking and Listening" the participation is direct, there is no intermediary. He compared his classes to painting, "The painting is just the repository of the actual artwork, which is the *making* of the painting. The only person who ever actually experiences the original artwork is the painter, while

he is painting it." His class then is a collaborative project between James and his students. In essence we are the only ones who actually hear or see his work, and yet the work is as much ours as it is his. It can only be known personally, through *our* senses, *our* bodies, *our* narratives.

Above all, one class that for me illustrated how our personal narratives and landscapes interacted was our trip to the oil fields. As a Californian native I have driven past these oil fields many times. As a child I used to tell my mother that the oil wells looked like great mechanical grasshoppers sucking at the earth, but though the objects were familiar, I had never actually seen one up close. James took us to the largest oil field in the US, a few hours north of LA, in the desert, surrounded by a wire fence and empty roadless desert. Technically we weren't even supposed to be there. He told us that he had never had any trouble, but that we should be discrete and look like we knew what we were doing (always good advice).

We drive in silence, crammed into the van. We aren't really supposed to talk on these expeditions, we're supposed to be concentrating. From the van he points to a white tower a couple of miles in the distance. We are to meet there in an hour or two. We go off in pairs. He drops us off at 500-yard intervals along the hilly desert landscape, and as we tumble out we are overcome by the pungent smell of oil. The machines whisper as they plunge up and down. It's a chilly and overcast day with intermittent sprays of rain. As the van full of our classmates drives off, my traveling partner and I fall into a landscape covered in brush, tumbleweeds, and coarse yellow sand. My partner asks me to wait a second as she ducks behind a shrub and doubles over vomiting into the weeds. When she returns she is pale, "Car sickness," she tells me as we make our way into the machinery. Soon we are surrounded. Close up, each oilrig has a personality. Standing over 15 feet tall, they are all slightly different shades of gray or green, coated with a rusty patina, dripped in minimalist trails of black gold. Some are surrounded by a small fence or have big pipelines snaking their way out across the ground, towards what? They tick and click and hiss and some are completely silent. There are strange artifacts to be found nearby, scallop shells, a small stuffed dog (implying a sinister narrative in my mind at least, how did some child's stuffed dog get out here?).

My traveling partner asks me if I have ever been anyplace like this. I have to think about that for a second. I feel like I must have. My mind is littered with images of quarried hillsides, diamond mines, barbed wire and foxholes; images from movies or reportage photography—all re-presentations. But have I *been* to any place like this? No. I have grown up viewing this landscape through my car window, this particular oilfield was no different than any other image I had seen through any other screen. My traveling partner hasn't been anywhere like this either. We both agree that this barren machine-ridden landscape is apocalyptic. We lose sight of our destination tower and my companion begins telling me stories that seem to somehow congeal with the landscape. She comes from a family of Jehovah's Witnesses. They believe the end of the world is immanent. There are only a few places in heaven for the worthy. Once, she had been a preacher in her church, but when she revealed her sexual orientation to her community she was excommunicated, doomed to eternal exile. Wandering along in this oilfield, it is easy to feel as if we both have been condemned. We joke about how James would frown on our imposition of drama onto the land around us—but then he likes the oilfields and told me once that he would like to live there. Occasionally we see a truck driving off in the distance. Do the people who work here also see the apocalypse when they look at these fields or do they just see a job, a machine that needs fixing, a distance between them and their families? No matter how close together we stand, no matter if we share proximity, our experiences always differ. My partner and I saw the apocalypse; some of the other students got lost, wandered into a nearby town, and found a petting zoo.

Two hours later we are in the snow. After the oilfields James takes us to a National Park none of us even knew existed. Now we are hiking up the side of Pine Mountain and we can see our breath. We are jubilant after the long ride. Snowball fights, hiding behind trees, whistling. Red berries pecked by birds, park ranger with big German Shepard and a rifle. Snow falls on our tongues. We are not used to snow in Southern California and it seems pure and exotic especially when contrasted by the grime of the oil fields. After a while we quiet down and twist in silence up the mountain path, the girl at the front of the line sets a brisk pace. James falls back and brings up the rear of our procession, slipping behind a bend as we push ahead. As we are walking someone says, "Listen." We all stop and look out over the woods. Hush as snow falls from pine branches, wind whispers along the forest floor, soft murmur of trees, breath, and birdsong, the litanies of the natural world. James comes around the corner, "It almost makes me cry to see all of you standing there

just listening like that," James says, truly moved.

James' class had a powerful effect on all of us. Whether or not our work is minimalist or structuralist or any other kind of "ist," the class inspired us. One of the most highly lauded films to come out of CalArts, *Trona* (USA 2004), directed by David Fenster, was conceived on the trip he took in Benning's class to the deserted meth lab town of the same name. The excursion that most influenced my own work was the trip we took to downtown Los Angeles, because of that class I changed the entire plotline of my novel to incorporate my new understanding of "the underworld."

~

We arrive downtown and partner up, a guy for every girl as this is a dangerous area. We head from the train station to the ten square blocks of downtown Los Angeles known as Skid Row. This area is strewn with flophouses; populated by junkies, prostitutes, crack addicts, runaways, and homeless people expunged from hospitals still wearing their catheters. To get there one has to pass the gates of culture, the Disney Concert Hall designed by Frank Gehry, the County Courthouse, the LA Times building, the Museum of Contemporary Art. Turn the corner and you will find people condemned to live in cardboard shelters they construct every night, only to tear them down again every morning because of a city ordinance. If the material reality of Skid Row shows us anything it is the strong racial and class divides that still mar the moral landscape of our country, 90% of the inhabitants of Skid Row are black; I suspect the reverse demographic is true at any symphony in the Disney Concert Hall.

My traveling partner and I take a wrong turn and end up walking down a wide industrial alleyway. On my right, sitting on an apple crate surrounded by rotting burritos, a greasy blanket, piles of garbage and stained rags, sits a naked man maybe 60 years old. He shows no sense of embarrassment, he shows no sense of awareness at all. I try to avert my eyes to afford him some sense of privacy, but feel awkward shifting my gaze, as if I am avoiding facing the reality of poverty in my country. Up ahead is a woman in a long dress made of what looks like a potato sack, shaking her hands above her, bucking her head like a trapped mare. I recount to my traveling partner something I heard about Hinduism once—that all realms of being exist on this earth right now, the most exalted levels of heaven, the most abysmal pits of hell; I think this is what the latter might be like.

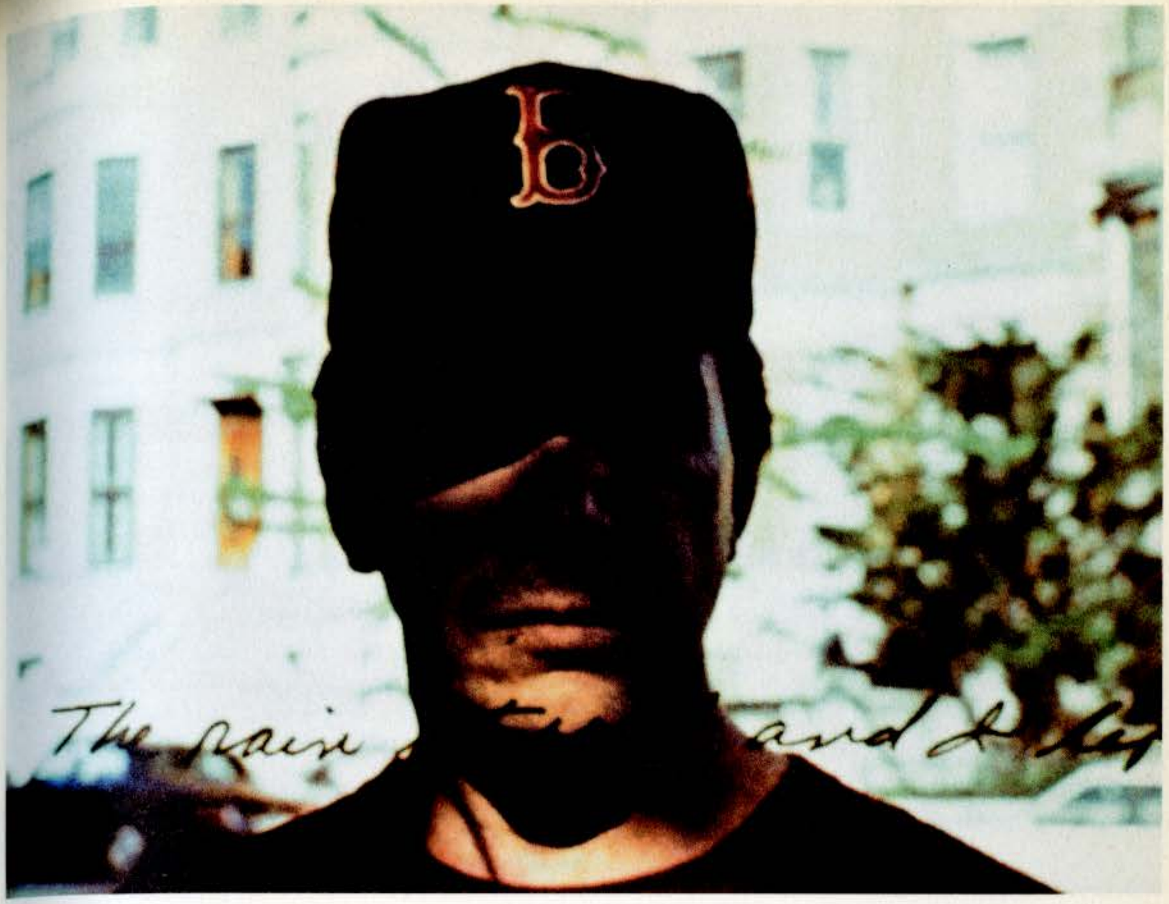
My classmate and I observe the lack of environmental borders to this territory. There are no ravines, rivers, or mountain ranges to contain this part of town. Technically, there is no physical boundary that prevents people from leaving Skid Row. The nucleus of downtown has always been the train station, there are a thousand roads out, five freeways, buses galore, but from our bodies there is no escape, we cannot escape the narrative history that composes them. How we came to be where we are is a filter on the lens we use to look at our environment. Our personal histories are tangled with the history of the landscape. The physical environment demonstrates social injustice—some people live in cardboard, some people walk on marble, some people drink wine imported from the windswept cliffs of the Rhone Valley, others trade their body for crack cocaine made in a rat infested flop house. The history of Los Angeles, the slave trade, the Disney Empire, the War on Drugs, the demolition of Bunker Hill, are all intangible historical events that somehow birthed the appearance of the people on Skid Row that day, myself included. Simultaneous environments exist on top of one another; for the rich, the homeless, the working class, the artists, and the ones who straddle these designations, for all individuals the environment shifts in a dynamic kaleidoscope of the personal.

James, the other students and I, and even you the reader, are a part of the same reality as the people living on Skid Row. But there are fundamental differences to the ways we function in and perceive the material world. It's the difference in our narratives that make both art and life interesting, but also terrifying sometimes and hard. In our social ecosystem each of us sees and speaks differently while being a part of the same whole. It isn't just what is immediately visible in the environment that is important, the fundamental nature of a subject is hidden within its membranes, only to be revealed through close personal attention. Our individual attention gives life to the environment, we create through seeing, and each of us finds something new. For me, that is the greatest tragedy of Skid Row; that all the individual perspectives, passions and observations of the people who live there are lost in the struggle for survival.

Later that same day our class met at a big international food court, the Farmer's Market, we sat there drinking and eating while James told us that part of him felt guilty every time he did this portion of the class. Guilty for sending the art students from the elite art school down to gawk at the poor as part of a class field trip. Even now I feel guilty writing this, art becomes

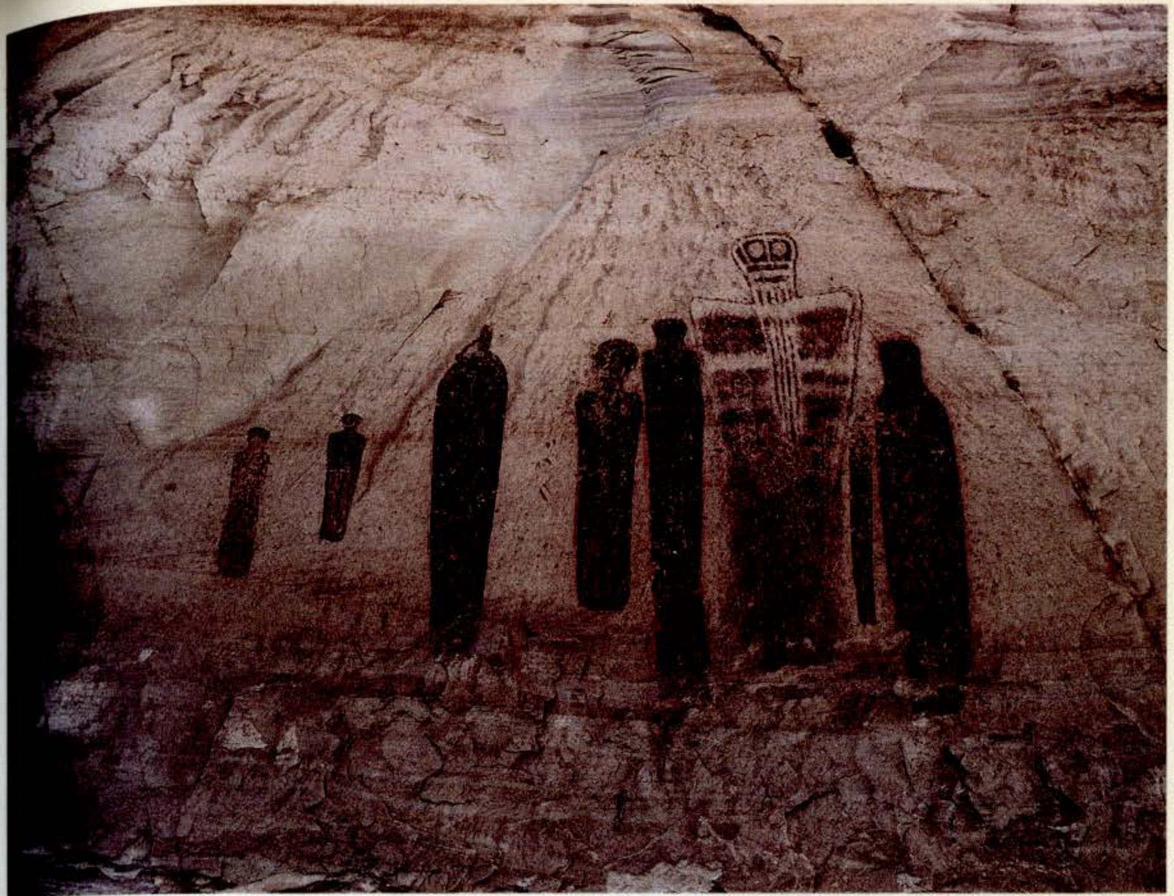
problematic when juxtaposed against real human suffering. And yet, would it be more ethical to look away, to focus instead on chowder barges, pine trees, windmills, suburbia? One of the essential aspects of James' work is an ethical component delivered purely through image and sound, devoid of any didacticism. But can the mysteries of a subject emerge simply through listening and seeing? Is that enough? As artists, isn't it our duty to try and make sense of reality, to reconstruct and present it in a way that seduces the observer into re-examination, into seeing the relevance of those things that had previously been hidden or unobserved?

In many ways these questions are unanswerable, or can only be answered personally through the practice of each individual artist. But in "Looking and Listening," James helped us to find a place to begin. Just quietly observing, something magical happens. When the clouds of our psyches lift, our internal monologues fade into silence, and our focus expands to accommodate the world, reality appears in all its glory, its strife, its majesty, story upon story and world upon world into the infinite. Yes, it's just a lake, just 6th street, just CalArts. We are doing the same things we always do, but now the world is bigger. In writing this I have had to restrain myself several times from aligning James' class with the mystical, Buddhism, Shamanism, some kind of religious practice. It's a natural propensity of mine; but for me the shifting of reality that took place in James' class is what made it essential to my development as an artist. Magic is the ability to transform reality, it happens through a shift in perspective. Art is one of the tools. Through dedicated observation, we have the power to remove the murk of the known world and transform it into something boundless, bright, infinitely worthy. It all depends on how willing the artist is to engage; what you are willing to give is reciprocated exponentially by existence. There is no shortage of material. Start with your kitchen as a child. Sit and listen in your own home. Walk the oilfields just outside the town where you grew up. Be patient. Pay attention. The story is already there. Here it comes.



North on Evers (1991)

Deseret (1995)



Four Corners (1997)

UTOPIA (1998)

Claudia Slanar

Landscape, History and Romantic Allusions

El Valley Centro *(1999) to* RR *(2007)*

"*El Valley Centro* came out of *UTOPIA*. I became interested in irrigated farming and in the issue of who does the work and who makes the profit."[1] James Benning's relocation to California where he began teaching in 1987, gradually caused his interest in the American landscape to shift to his new environment. *El Valley Centro* (1999), the first part of what has become known as the 'California Trilogy', resulted from his confrontation with the Imperial Valley in *UTOPIA*. The Great Central Valley is likewise primarily shaped by agricultural mass production, which provides food for one quarter of the United States.[2]

The second part of the trilogy, entitled *Los* (2000), is dedicated to Greater Los Angeles, while the final part, *Sogobi* (2001), is a portrait of the Californian wilderness.

1) Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5. Interviews With Independent Filmmakers*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 243.

2) In the production text, Benning already focuses on topics and motifs of the film: "The Great Central Valley occupies most of the interior of California. It is 440 miles long and 60 miles wide and provides food for one-quarter of the United States. The farms and ranches are large agribusinesses owned by oil companies, insurance conglomerates, and railroads. Thirty percent of the labor consists of undocumented workers. Within the valley there are many small towns inhabited by hard working people living in poverty. *El Valley Centro* is a sound/image portrait of this valley."

All three films adhere to a strict structural form. Each has a running time of 90 minutes and consists of 35 shots that are exactly two and a half minutes long. This mathematical precision is echoed on the visual plane through Benning's precisely framed shots, a method employed since *One Way Boogie Woogie*. In contrast, the visual strategy employed in the trilogy does not emphasize the two-dimensionality of the image but rather three-dimensionality, the panoramic nature and the potential sublimity of landscape.

Benning's way of looking at landscape has changed in comparison to the text-image films, and it is altered within the trilogy as a whole. The shots not only capture landscapes that reveal sedimentary traces of history, but also the immediate impact of mankind upon the environment. History is also made manifest in the present. People are perpetually at work in *El Valley Centro* but rarely to be seen. Bulldozers, trains and harvest machinery pass through the shots; a rodeo is in practice; we can hear roll being called in one of the eleven state prisons located in the valley. As in *One Way Boogie Woogie*, the action appears to be choreographed, however Benning denies this. According to him, it is only a matter of waiting for the right moment, which reveals itself through careful observation.

The tight framing of the action is reminiscent of early cinema and emphasizes off screen space while disrupting the documentary character of the shots. This leaves no doubt that we are dealing with the subjective view of the filmmaker.

In *El Valley Centro* the image is usually divided in half by a horizontal line while diagonals merge at the center, most often accentuating the lower half of the screen. On the one hand, Benning incorporates the painterly tradition of strictly structuring pictorial space according to a central perspective. On the other hand, symmetry is often disrupted by objects that move laterally through the frame, interfering with the original composition of the image.

Perspective as "symbolic form"[3] is reemphasized through Benning's humorous and playful treatment of spatial depth. Harvesters drive in and out of the frame; a freight ship passes across the horizon as if gliding through a meadow and looks like it is overtaken by a car. In *Los*, Benning deviates from this principle. In contrast to the deep space of landscape shots, he focuses on verticality and texture, for instance when he films a herd of cattle enclosed in a corral, or a troupe of policemen waiting in rank and file for deployment. *Los* shows the diversity of Greater Los Angeles: country scenes, such as that of a community-farming project are interspersed with views of government buildings. Benning films the city as a space of social interaction.

The choice of landscapes in *Sogobi* indicates a certain development that stands in contrast to the sprawling nature of *Los*: "When I made *Sogobi*, my first idea was to make a film that was purely about nature and about landscape that wasn't encroached upon, almost in a biblical sense, finding real grandeur. (...) As I went around the US, I realized that it became less interesting to me, the encroachment became more interesting to me than the beauty."[4] The gradual and relentless creeping of mankind's encroachment upon the environment is reflected in the film's structure. After a series of contemplative nature shots, a helicopter is heard off screen, shortly thereafter entering the frame and scooping up water before disappearing from view. From this point on one becomes aware that a constant level of noise permeates the entire film and the pristine character of nature perceived before is exposed as an illusion.

3) Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

4) James Benning in conversation with Barbara Pichler and Claudia Slanar. All direct quotations and references unless noted are taken from a series of interviews with the editors in California and Vienna in spring and autumn of 2006.

El Valley Centro (1999, top), *Los* (2000)

Each of the films in the trilogy contains political implications elucidated in the concluding credits. Title cards annotate the featured locations and issues of corporate ownership, thus alluding to a political reading that is only implicitly contained in the images. The landscape is not simply presented according to a romantic and sublime pictorial tradition, but as permeated by capital and labor, including industry and the circulation of goods, and the sparse commodity of water. The Californian waterway is therefore a central theme connecting all three parts of the trilogy, and water continually recurs as a visual motif. A crucial resource that is redirected for the purposes of agricultural production, it is a wellspring of life in one region, leaving deprived land arid in its wake elsewhere. The wasteful use of water in the desert city of Los Angeles is exposed. Finally, the natural conditions that keep water flowing through the landscape are seen in *Sogobi*. The three films share their opening and concluding shots, foregrounding the theme of water: we see the pumping station of an aqueduct, the ocean and, emblematically, a flood-spillway that presents an abstract maelstrom which seems to draw water into the void.

The 'California Trilogy' not only shows Benning's masterful interweaving of aesthetics and politics, but also demonstrates his sensitivity as a filmmaker who belongs to a privileged social group, concentrating on an imbalance of power deeply embedded in the history of the United States and its colonial conquest. In the titles themselves, he uses a mixture of Spanish and English for the Central Valley (*El Valley Centro*), the Spanish abbreviation for Los Angeles (*Los*), and the Shoshone word for 'earth' (*Sogobi*).

The music accompanying the concluding credits also express Benning's mindfulness. It does not simply bear witness to contemporary history, but reopens a further interpretation in retrospect. The music provides a unique 'sense of place'. It is the expression of Benning's wish for a more just social order and conveys a feeling of utopia not bound by place and "presenting society itself in a perfected form."[5] The first song is about the Virgin of Guadalupe sung by a Mexican artist Benning recorded in a bar in the Central Valley. In *Los*, he uses "A Little Bit of Love" by songwriter Victoria Williams who lives out in the Mojave Desert at Joshua Tree: "I thought it might be a romantic answer to the film, I was really quite touched by the music and the meaning of it and what we really need." And for *Sogobi* he chooses "Amazing Grace" sung by Verdell Primeaux (Oglala/Yankton Sioux), Johnny Mike (Navajo) in their languages.

In contrast to the previous films, Benning's treatment of information in the trilogy has substantially changed. "It reduces the variety of ways that I am giving you information but the amount of info is maybe more. It's more hidden but it needs a more pro-active audience, an active eye, an active ear to listen and an active mind to draw conclusions from that one shot and then from the accumulation of shots." His emphasis on 'paying attention' in order to capture a 'sense of place' challenges the members of the audience to actively engage with the films. After completing the trilogy, he wondered if he should not have made some of the shots last longer, in order to heighten understanding of the events depicted. Yet this might have tested the limits of what he could expect of the audience: "I don't want to do a film just for myself." He nonetheless proceeds to extend the duration of the shots to 10 minutes in both of his subsequent films, *13 LAKES* (2004) as well as *TEN SKIES* (2004).

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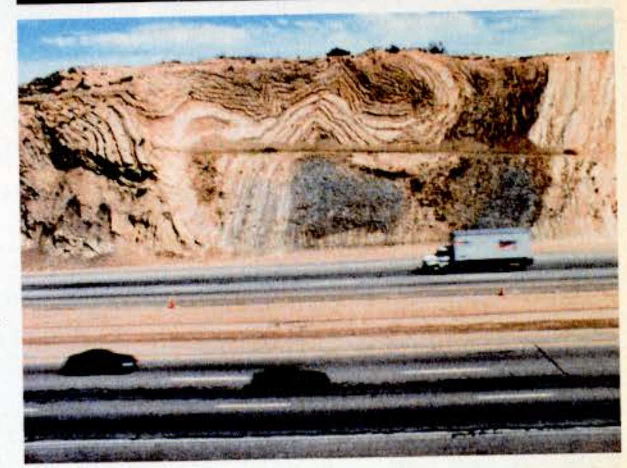
In the aptly entitled *13 LAKES*, Benning portrays 13 lakes in the United States, chosen according to their size and unique features, including geological formations, man-made constructions, and geographical locations. They are cast like protagonists in a fiction film, based on their unique qualities. The concept of 'landscape as a function of time', which is already presented in *Sogobi*, becomes evident through the duration of shots again captured by a static camera. The lakes change their character over the course of the take. Some changes are due to meteorological conditions or the time of day. The sun rises over the mountain range at Jackson Lake, filmed in real time; others are the result of human encroachment: pleasure boating on the Salton Sea, a freighter gliding past ice-flows on Lake Superior. Then again, economic realities leave their mark and are inseparable from the landscape and its history.

In *13 LAKES*, each shot is separated by eight seconds of black leader, conveying a sense of spatial distance between locations while also functioning as placeholders for the performative act of Benning's exploration. At the same time, a viewer that may have become mesmerized by a shot, is suddenly jolted out of the experience. The attention required by *13 LAKES* as well as *TEN SKIES*, leads to a fluctuation between impatience, immersion and digression. Benning is well aware of this, as he ironically remarks: "I'm always hoping my films are open enough that you bring some of your own narratives to them. So if you're in the middle of it and you start thinking, 'I have to do my laundry tomorrow', that becomes a part of my film." He is clearly conscious of the interpretive effort that is required by his films: "I am hoping that it actually becomes apparent to the audience, too, who they are and what their prejudices are when they determine what something means."

The narrative aspect of Benning's films previously delineated in tight shots encapsulating micro-narratives, is gradually transferred to off screen space. In *13 LAKES*, this transition initially takes place through visible encroachments upon the landscape by agents who are not seen.

5) Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, lecture, originally given in March 1967, English translation from: http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html
German quote: Michel Foucault, "Andere Räume," in Karlheinz Barck (ed.), *Aisthesis. Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik*, 5th edition (Leipzig: Reclam, 1993) p. 45.

Sogobi (2001)



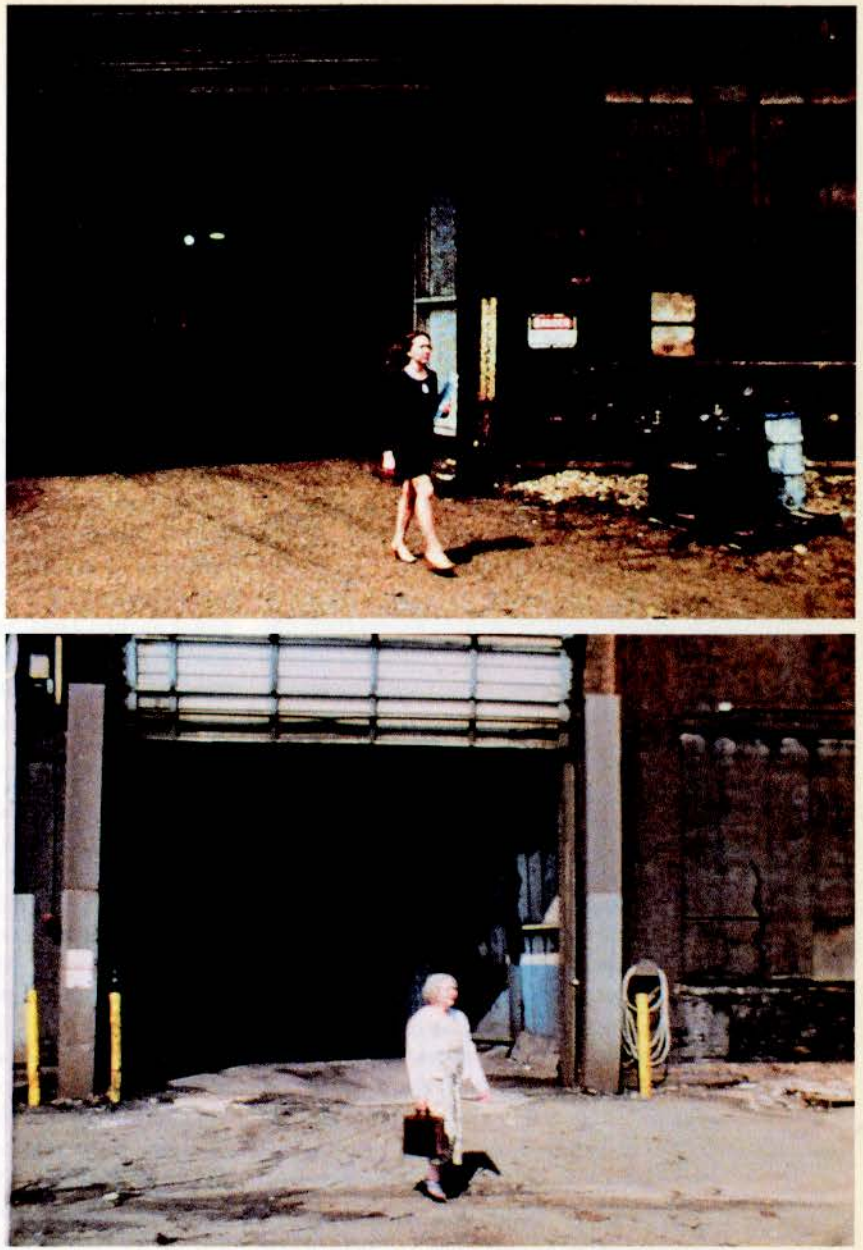
This changes in the second to last shot of the film. The silence and exaltation of the breathtaking panorama of Crater Lake with its shoreline symmetrically reflected in the center of the frame is suddenly shattered by the sound of gunshots, which seem strangely dislocated. This displacement is in fact literal given that the gunshots were added during the editing of the soundtrack.

While he was shooting *13 LAKES*, Benning developed the idea of making *TEN SKIES*, its 'companion film': "It changed my way of looking at the sky when I was doing *13 LAKES*. I had much more awareness of what I was doing. I looked at weather reports before going filming."

TEN SKIES shows ten different views of the sky above Val Verde where Benning lives, Pine Flat and Trona, California, again captured by 10-minute long, static shots. "The sky as a function of the landscape"[6] directs us to focus on time as a function of space, and film as a time-based medium in contrast to painting and photography, traditions which are often drawn upon in reference to Benning's films. The diversity of shapes and colors that characterize these skies is constantly in a state of change, which is sometimes fast and dramatic and at other times very slow and difficult to perceive. The images provoke a visual giddiness, briefly disorienting our sense of time and place. At the same time, the audience is challenged to sustain its attention to the commonplace through the sheer duration of the shots. The skies represent the concept of nature as a 'ready-made', as a pre-existing object that is turned into a work of art by means of an artistic signature. This signature is made palpable through the framing of the image, the duration of the shots, additionally framed by black leader. The constructed nature of representation itself is unveiled.

In *TEN SKIES* the soundtrack entirely assumes the function of narration, the 'stories' characteristically remaining fragmentary and difficult to grasp. The soundtrack includes everything from sounds of nature to radio sound bites, the noise of traffic and industry, conversational fragments, and the 'sound of silence'. Benning constructs a soundtrack that subtly evokes a sense of place without depending on synchronous sound, while simultaneously opening up narrative space. This aural strategy reaches a high point with *TEN SKIES*. He subsequently takes a slightly different route.

6) Volker Pantenburg, "Ansichtssache," in Giesenfeld/Koebner (eds.), *Augenblicke. Blicke auf Landschaften*, vol. 37 (2005), p. 15.



One Way Boogie Woogie/ 27 Years Later (1977/2004)

Before completing *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*, Benning already embarks on his next film, *27 Years Later* (2004). *27 Years Later* is a precise re-filming of each individual shot in *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), "because I was nostalgic, and it was a vehicle for me to revisit my past and to meet old friends again."

Benning refers to the process of aging, which causes him to reflect upon the strategy and content of the original film: "[B]ecause of that [aging] you lose a bit of your sense of humor, because you're over-analyzing the way you work. So I thought why don't I try to remake the film and use those same jokes to see what happens to a joke over time in another context." His motivation also includes a deeply personal interest: Benning focuses on the transformation of Milwaukee's cityscape. His hometown was an industrial metropolis already in decline when he made the original film. Its downfall is evident twenty-seven years later and has progressed further: Old buildings have not been replaced by new buildings, instead they have been left in a state of decay. The melancholic tone of *27 Years Later* extends to the material of the film itself. The highly saturated Pop Art colors of the original have been replaced by a film stock that presents a duller palette. Benning uses the original soundtrack for the new film, rendering a disjunctive effect reminiscent of *UTOPIA*: Image and sound relate to one another but are never entirely in sync, creating a mild sense of dislocation. *One Way Boogie Woogie/27 Years Later* is not simply a melancholic reflection upon Benning's past, but also takes up previous interests: "Another reason to do it was to go back to narrative. Now that I'm making the train film [*RR*], I was thinking: Maybe I want to add text again. (…) I like to look and listen, but you have to go to other places, too."

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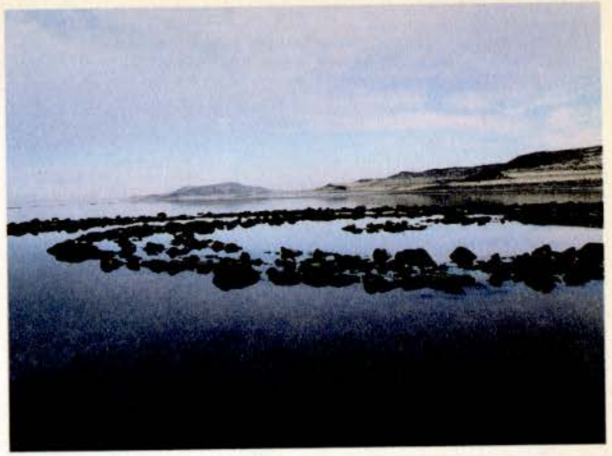
Benning begins working on *casting a glance* (2007) before completing the 'train film' *RR* (2007). He concerns himself with a place he has repeatedly visited and filmed since *North on Evers* (1991): the *Spiral Jetty* by landartist Robert Smithson who died in 1973.[7] James Benning's portrait of this famous earthwork consists of 78 one-minute shots filmed with a static camera at various times of the day and year. He again adheres to a rigid scheme: Each of the 16 sequences consists of four to seven shots separated by black leader. They are marked with dates, thereby providing a timeline. The title of the film and ensuing dedication—"in memory of Robert Smithson," is followed by an image of the lake's surface accompanied by the sound of lapping water. Water and

casting a glance (2007)

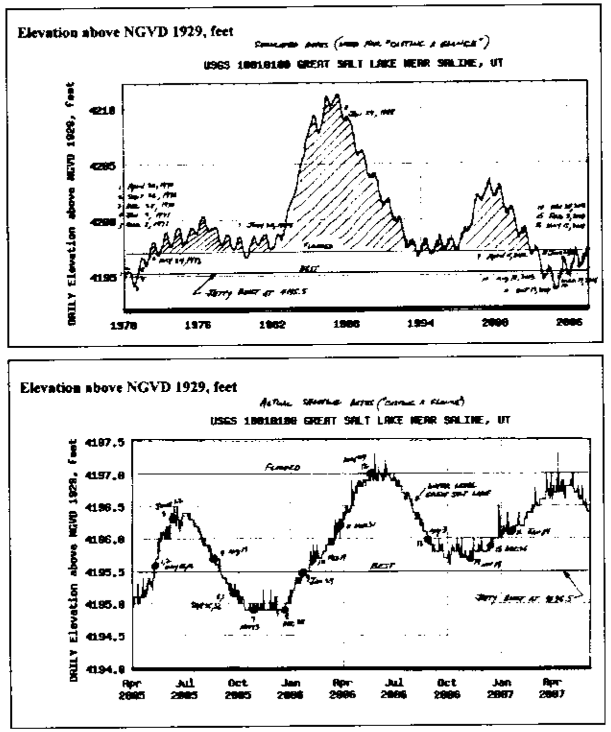


sky seem to merge, the horizon line can barely be distinguished. A title indicates the year the *Spiral Jetty* was built: April 30, 1970. In this first shot the jetty appears in its entirety, the shoreline runs parallel to the bottom of the frame while the jetty coils at its center. Symmetry and complete visibility establish a perfect view of the landscape. Subsequent perspectives oscillate permanently between this concept of perfection, beauty and its deconstruction.

The timeline establishes the history of the *Spiral Jetty* like a chronological flashback in a fiction film. Benning has researched the data meticulously and uses diagrams of the water levels in the past thirty years to narrate this story of the jetty's shifting visibility. This larger historical narrative is connected to the micro-story of Benning's perennial examination of the site and the artwork during visits he made from 2005 to 2007—the last insert reads May 15, 2007.[8] The geological and climatic changes in the water level are conceptually reflected in the

7) Robert Smithson (USA, 1938–1973) created his earthwork *Spiral Jetty* in April 1970. Built of mud, salt crystals, basalt rocks, earth, and water on the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake near Rozel Point in Utah/USA, it forms a 1500-foot long and 15-foot wide counterclockwise coil jutting from the shore of the lake. At the time of its construction, the water level of the lake was unusually low because of a drought. Within a few years, the water level returned to normal and submerged the jetty for the next three decades. Due to a recent drought, the jetty re-emerged in 1999 and is now completely exposed. Originally black rock against ruddy water, it is now largely white against pink due to salt encrustation and lower water levels. Based on an entry for *Spiral Jetty* in Wikipedia, accessed in August 2007, www.wikipedia.org

8) This intertwining finds further traces in the micro-structure of the film. By examining the inserts, 'accidental' connections are revealed: Robert Smithson died on the 20th of july 1973. This date is used in one of the inserts as well as the birthday of Benning's daughter, Sadie. In consideration of Benning's precise planning and research, these are probably not the only inserts charged with meaning.



James Benning, diagrams charting the water level of the Great Salt Lake (2006/2007)

seasonal and daily cycles of the jetty during Benning's visits to the location. These constant changes are visualized in various shots of the jetty including close-ups of salt crystals and panoramic shots of the shoreline. The inserts posit geological markers, establishing snapshots of the site as extracted over time.

Compared to previous films such as *13 LAKES* or *TEN SKIES*, the views of the jetty oscillate between stasis and high drama due to their shortness. They literally glance at the flow of time. By quoting Robert Smithson—"A great artist can make art by simply casting a glance"—Benning also refers to Smithson's philosophy beyond *Spiral Jetty*. Smithson conceived of history as a non-linear space in which different layers of time are interwoven. Landscape is a testimony, manifesting sedimentary layers of historic events, that include both geological and man-made aspects. The spiral form serves as a metaphorical visualization of precisely this nonlinearity and interconnectedness.[9]

casting a glance also engages an audio component of ambient sounds including water, wind, birds and crickets, occasionally mixed with non-diegetic noise. This adds yet another narrative dimension to Benning's observation of the jetty, which ultimately provides the artwork itself with another layer of meaning. For example, in one of the sequences we repeatedly hear a screaming that seems to come out of nowhere. It is out of place and eerie, subverting the film's temporal linearity, and creating a sense of spatial and narrative confusion. The shot that is

9) In this respect I think of Robert Smithson's description of locating the site for the *Spiral Jetty*: "This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the *Spiral Jetty*. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. (…) Matter collapsing into the lake mirrored in the shape of a spiral. No sense wondering about classifications and categories, there were none." Benning seems to realize this process in several shots of *casting a glance*. Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in Lynne Cooke/Karen Kelly (eds.), *Robert Smithson. Spiral Jetty* (New York: Dia Art Foundation; Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: Univ. of California Press, 2005), p. 8.

emblematic of this uncertainty occurs in a sequence dated March 15, 2005: We see a formation of grey basalt stones crossing the frame diagonally in front of an entirely blue background, fusing water and sky into one indistinguishable surface. This optical illusion collapses spatial categories.

Narrative space as introduced through sound also culminates in this sequence: "Love Hurts," a song Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris recorded in 1973, the year of Smithson's death, blends with the ambient sound of the scene. The 'utopian place' Benning established through his use of music in the 'California Trilogy' seems to have found a location. This choice of music charges the sequence with a strong romantic sentiment enhanced by other images of the *Spiral Jetty*, depicting it in the incredibly beautiful pinkish-blue light of dawn.

In his last completed film to date, *RR* (2007), the sound track again plays an important narrative role. 43 shots present freight trains traversing 16 states in the US. The length of each shot is determined by the time it takes for a train to pass in and out of the frame. This principle of tying the duration of a shot to the completion of an action was utilized as early as *11 × 14* (1976), although it was previously integrated as a structural element rather than defining the entire shape of the film.

Benning again composes symmetrical, panoramic images of the landscape, emphasizing central perspective and vanishing points. He repeatedly opens a scene with a static view of the landscape which is soon interrupted by a symbol of human encroachment: A train enters the image and obscures our view until it exits the frame, returning us to a brief glimpse of the environment. Dominating machines and technical structures convey visual spectacles that reflect Benning's fascination with railroads: "Trains are interesting to me since I was a child and the history of the railroads (…) is kind of a metaphor of how America was allowed to grow. (…) The shooting also allowed me to be outside and witness this kind of marvelous engineering, (…) tunnels and crossings of huge mountains which is kind of spectacular."

In contrast, fragments of sound dispersed throughout the film emphasize his ambivalence in relation to the history of the railroads: a history which implies the conquest of the American West, the suppression of its natives, the transformation and finally commodification of nature. This layer of sound includes a political speech as well as religious hymns and relics of

RR (2007)

popular culture such as advertising jingles. Whereas Benning has repeatedly used this strategy since *Him and Me* (1981), he truly refines it in *RR*. The intertwining of personal and social memory is reflected in the sounds he selects: the Mormon Tabernacle Choir sings "The Battle Hymn of the Republic;" a baseball game from 1992 is mixed with a Coca-Cola radio spot sung by Karen Carpenter (1970); Gregory Peck reads from the "Book of Revelations;" Woody Guthrie sings "This Land is Your Land;" President Eisenhower gives a farewell speech in 1961, cautioning against the military industrial complex; and finally, the hip-hop-band N.W.A. raps "Fuck the Police."

Like trains passing through the landscapes, these sounds traverse the history of the United States, conveying 'God's Own Country' with Benning in its midst, profoundly torn between utopian aspirations, cultural artifacts and political realities.

"My films may be accessible on one level, but they are also challenging on another level, the politics in them kind of sneak up on you. That's all in those images."

Translated by Renée von Paschen and Eve Heller

Volker Pantenburg

Encyclopedia Americana

James Benning: Times, Places, Perceptions

Preliminary Observation

Surveying its own land has always been a central concern of US cinema. It is an impulse that has led to countless individual films as well as lending entire genres their specific form. The Western portrays the expansion of the American West and the conflicts it triggered, while every road movie executes a criss-crossing of the continent that is at once real and symbolic. These are geographic movements that traverse the country and excavate layers of its history. But they are also movements that penetrate and traverse the history of cinema. They leave their traces in films and therefore must be possible to chart.

Two American directors practice this filmic surveying of the US in an exceptional way. They do not undertake it within the logic of a genre—or perhaps one could say, they have developed their own respective genres through decades of working away in the wide field of documentary filmmaking. It might be surprising that this preliminary observation relates to James Benning and Frederick Wiseman. I don't want to take the comparison of these filmmakers too far, but I would nonetheless like to sketch some similarities within the context of their differences. Both have been making films for close to forty years—Wiseman since 1967, Benning since the beginning of the 1970s. Both work with 16mm film and without a complicated production apparatus. This enables them to embody a cinema of the auteur which, although entirely dependent upon their person, at the same time allows them to disappear behind the films in order to direct an observant and rigorous gaze upon what is to be seen. Both work in series, each new work presenting a new stitch or knot in the 'net' of films they have created.[1]

Looking at their filmographies, one might see a similarity between the encyclopedic projects undertaken by Wiseman and Benning with their different points of emphasis. Wiseman characterizes the USA in terms of its institutions, his point of departure being the places and social situations in which the individual is confronted by societal regulations and procedures. Institutional modes of operation are represented through the exchange of words and

1) See also Scott MacDonald's speculation in conversation with Benning: "I'm wondering whether, when you're making a film, you're thinking of it as part of an ongoing exploration, or whether you're just thinking about the project at hand." Benning's answer some time later: "So the films just keep growing out of one another. You can trace my films from *11 × 14* all the way up through the trilogy." "James Benning. On His Westerns," in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5. Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 242.

the association of agents within the institutional context. These interactions give rise to illuminating dialogic films with an impressive dynamic and particular sociological parlance. Psychiatry, school, the police department, the monastery, the social welfare office, the department store, the zoo, and numerous other places,[2] the most recent topic being the legislative process in *State Legislature* (USA 2007): Each film puzzles a further piece of the prior image of society, a puzzle that remains essentially incomplete since administrative acts have a historical index and are subject to change.

James Benning, on the other hand, characterizes the North American continent through its often reticent topography. Interiors are seldom seen in his most recent films, as opposed to earlier works before *Deseret* (1995). Benning directs his gaze less upon the nation and more upon the physical and mental landscape of the USA, continually undertaking new journeys. Sometimes this leads to repeated visits to particular places, like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* at the Great Salt Lake; sometimes to the development of new territories and states: Wisconsin (*11 × 14*, *One Way Boogie Woogie, Grand Opera*), New York City (*Him and Me*), Utah and its bordering states (*Deseret, Four Courners*), the borders between South California and Mexico (*UTOPIA*), the state of California and the city of Los Angeles ('California Trilogy'). Benning and Wiseman clearly undertake very different projects, but they are related in their persistent effort to reveal a collective, barely discernible, perhaps unconscious state of the country through their concise focus upon the concrete. They are also related in how they firmly stand within film history while interpreting its established framework in a political manner: One can see a connection between Wiseman's discursive politic of information and communication deriving from 'direct cinema' and Benning's conceptual politic of image and structure. Although Benning reveals himself to be skeptical in regard to Wiseman's project and the 'truth' claimed by 'direct cinema', for me, both Benning and Wiseman attempt to realize a narrative cinema that tells of interrelations rather than individual people and figures. In a film like *Landscape Suicide* (1986), in which the landscapes of two crimes are short circuited with the process of being solved, the projects of Wiseman and Benning touch upon one another in a strange way.

2) In the aforementioned sequence: *Titicut Follies* (1967), *High School* (1968), *Law and Order* (1969), *Essene* (1972), *Welfare* (1975), *The Store* (1983), *Zoo* (1993). A complete filmography can be found on the website of Wiseman's production company Zipporah Films, ww.zipporah.com.

I. Let's begin at the beginning, or one of the potential beginnings:

"One afternoon in the early 1960s, I was flipping through the four channels on my television set. It was a 20-inch, b&w Muntz. Upright model. Somewhere between *American Bandstand* and *Cooking with Bretta Green*, images crossed the screen that were completely foreign to me. They changed my way of seeing and thinking. A scary experience for a boy trying to fight his way out of his late teenage years. Eight years later I bought an 8mm Bolex and tried to follow their lead. So now, almost 40 years later, I find this a good time and place to thank Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid for that enlightening and fine afternoon."[3]

Benning often recounts this experience of initiation which is first and foremost a primal scene of reception and cognition.[4] The idea that the shooting of a film is merely a productive extension of concentrated and observant perception—of films, of reality—continues to be one of the main principles to which Benning's films are indebted. The framing gesture of his hands and how he cups his palms behind his ears with each patient encounter of a future shooting location, emblematically marks the transition from the bodily act of recognition to the registration of recording picture and sound.[5] It is therefore appropriate that Benning has given his courses at the California Institute for the Arts elemental titles like 'Looking and Listening'.

Benning's recollection of Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's films in the above quote also indicates his close association with the American tradition of experimental film, a tradition in which a sparsity of means is married to a good measure of personal expression. In *Grand Opera* (1979), this association is taken up and conveyed via explicit references to Stan Brakhage, Hollis Frampton, Yvonne Rainer, Michael Snow and George Landow—connections, appropriations, bridges into the archive of cinema. And despite this emphasis upon cinema, it is not inappropriate that Benning's filmic initiation takes place via his television at home. Because, forty years later, a young person in Germany could very well stumble upon the images of a James Benning film while channel

3) James Benning, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 1. (Autumn 1998), p. 55.

4) See also the conversation with Scott MacDonald, in *A Critical Cinema 2. Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 223–224.

5) Wulf's documentary film—*James Benning. Circling the Image* (Germany 2003, WDR)—is also informative. Benning is seen travelling to shooting locations, preparing and filming some shots for *13 LAKES*.

11 × 14 (1976, top),
Him and Me (1981)

surfing and be similarly stunned. Nine films made in the last 10 years were either co-produced or bought and broadcast by German channels (WDR/arte/3sat): the 'California Trilogy' (*El Valley Centro, Los, Sogobi*), *13 LAKES, TEN SKIES, One Way Boogie Woogie/27 Years later, RR*, the earlier films *Four Corners* and *UTOPIA*. The complex relationship between cinema and television is indicated by the fact that a German television channel and, specifically, a commissioning editor at the station in Cologne, Reinhard Wulf, plays a substantial part in making Benning's films financially possible.

Still, the 'proper' location for Benning's works is the same as for the films of Maya Deren or Hollis Frampton: the movie theater with its capacity to project 16mm film and, above all, its clear indication of when a film starts and when it ends. This would initially appear paradoxical given that Benning started out as a filmmaker in the 1970s and at the height of critical ideologies arguing against the restrictions of a predetermined cinematic apparatus. In film theory as well as in works by North American and European avant-garde film makers, the cinematic apparatus was consistently perceived as a coercive mechanism in the institutionalization of an oppressed viewer, as well as a regime of the dominant male gaze.[6] Cinema was accordingly attacked from various angles and on various levels: Narrative experienced a fragmentation of plot and a turning away from chronological

6) Compare with relevant texts by Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Louis Comolli and Marcelin Pleynet and their American counterparts, i.e. Teresa de Lauretis/Stephen Heath (eds.), *The Cinematic Apparatus* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980) and Laura Mulvey's influential text written in 1973 and published two years later, entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, no. 16/3 (1975), pp. 6–18.

storytelling; illusory effects were revealed by drawing attention to the materiality of film and the cinematic apparatus; alternative venues and distribution structures were favored over traditional movie theaters.

In Benning's films this tradition is clearly recognizable: His works are not conceived from the viewpoint of their protagonists or a speculative psychology. They rather unfold from mathematical structures and conceptual decisions that transform solitary narrative fragments into forms and patterns. The 360-degree pan in *Grand Opera* is a good example: Benning systematically shoots each house in which he lived since his birth in 1942. A brief frontal shot of the house with a subtitle indicating location and year is followed by a slow pan to the left, the shot gradually returning to the position and image where it began.

At the same time, the film's contemporary context of the late 70s (the time of the telling) perforates the soundtrack in the form of brief narrative sketches that convey autobiographical moments restaging the period indicated (the narrated time). The 10-minute sequences have a kind of consistency and panoramic quality aspiring to formal perfection, but the way they follow upon one another and combine with particles of the narrative leads to a gentle vertigo. There are inconsistencies and ruptures between sound and image that have a lot to do with memory and transformation.[7] This ambivalence between closure and openness is characteristic of Benning's films to this day, in regard to the strictly (one might say painterly) framed image and the acoustic off screen space which ignores the frame and constructs a space that flows beside and behind the image of the film.

As in the case of the above mentioned pans: attention to form and structure meets with an interest in different forms of narration and autobiography. Benning's work therefore is also about a cinematic utopia—it transcends an ever so stubborn and unproductive separation between narrative and experimental film. This was acknowledged early on and the astounding scope and interconnection taking place in the American cinema of the 70s was signaled by Scott MacDonald in the middle of the 1980s: "All in all, Benning seemed a filmmaker who

7) Similarly disconcerting is the following spooky and prophetic sentence as spoken 15 to 20 times in *Grand Opera* by different people, cut into an edited sequence where permutations run forwards and backwards: "Two planes will pass overhead. It will explode. And a mushroom cloud will cover the city." In addition, one sees a skyline towards the end of the film with a highrise that collapses into itself, surrounded by a giant dust cloud. Compare: James Benning, "Sound and Stills from *Grand Opera*," *October*, no. 12 (Spring 1980), pp. 22–45.

might bridge the gap between independent film artists and Hollywood movie-makers."[8] I was surprised by this evaluation because Benning's films never really aspired to be a bridge between experimental and Hollywood cinema. From today's standpoint, it is a lovely idea but far removed from the realities of film production to associate the word 'Hollywood' with a filmmaker like Benning. On the other hand, Benning doesn't number among those directors who have cut all ties to traditional movie theaters and wandered off into the alternative spaces where experimental films are shown. This is probably one reason why his films couldn't be rediscovered like other classics of experimental cinema in recent years, through the institutions of the museum and the art gallery.[9]

From a somewhat presumptuous, historicizing perspective, Benning's films have something robust which exacerbates their reception and subservience to argumentation or curatorial grasping. It is hardly imaginable to separate a shot from one of his films in order to present it as an independent entity, not in the way that one extracts a particularly illuminating term from a larger text. The isolated image, the moment or the shot would have the quality of a random sampling, rather than providing a usable argument. In this sense, the films are hardly suitable for discursive exchange, they seem to partake of another economy that reminds me more of presents, or—to use a concept widely theorized in the past—'gifts'.[10] I would suppose that the seemingly subordinate question as to the appropriate site for Benning's films (and the question of their economic value), also depends upon the conditions of this internal economy.

II.

Like most works that belong to the structuralist film tradition of the 1970s, Benning's films are dependent upon a clear framework for their structure to be adequately perceived. This is the reason that Benning has strong reservations

8) Scott MacDonald "American Dreams," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Summer 1987), pp. 17–18.

9) In the last ten years, countless experimental film classics by artists such as Morgan Fisher, Jack Goldstein or Bruce Conner could be seen within the framework of group shows or one-man retrospectives in museums and galleries. Although James Benning's film on Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty (casting a glance)* was shown at the documenta 12 in Kassel, it was purposely presented as a film in a film program. See also the interview with Alexander Horwath, "Für eine andere Zeit in einem anderen Leben," *taz* (May 14, 2007).

10) See especially Jacques Derrida's influential book *Given Time. I. Counterfeit Money* (from the French by Peggy Kamuf, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Derrida develops a far reaching theory about the gift as something that is beyond any logic of purchase, sale or exchange based primarily on readings of texts by Marcel Mauss and Charles Baudelaire.

about museums and galleries as sites for exhibition, despite a few installation works he did in the 70s and 80s which are unknown to me. The supposed emancipation of the viewer who is in command of 'his/her time' and moves through the exhibition space at will, holds risks and has side effects.[11] A particular tectonic, and above all the sense of duration that is treated in films like *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*, are lost if the aesthetic experience is cut up into random segments. One can obviously grasp the principle of a Benning film quickly, but this principle is by no means the punchline waiting to be understood, but rather the catalyst for an experience that unfolds over time.

Conditions for the reception of a film can be inconsistent even within traditional film screening spaces. The viewer who is not satisfied with watching James Benning's films on a TV screen usually has two possibilities: One can either watch the films in a packed theater with a randomly gathered festival audience that has no direct connection to the films and often reacts impatiently to long takes. Or one can sit amidst a smaller audience attending a curated series, where the long take meets with an entirely different sense of time among the audience. Both situations have to do with the tempo of cinema in a very particular way. "I used to think the way you perceive time is a function of how much movement there is in the shot but maybe it's really a function of pleasure," says Benning.[12] A presumably objective quality of the films—the static camera, the distance between one cut and the next—is perceived in one case as an imposition and stolen time, and in the other case, as an opening and gift.

In addition to these basic differences as to the viewer's sense of time, the reception of the films is also connected with the discursive background which informs them. On the occasion of the Berlin Film Festival in 2000, Diedrich Diederichsen described two different practices of reception. In the 'International Forum', Benning's 'California Trilogy' as well as Sharon Lockhart's *Teatro Amazonas* (US/Brazil 1999)

11) On the presence of time in the cinema and the museum, compare for example, Dominique Païni, *Le temps exposé. Le cinéma de la salle au musée* (Edition Cahiers du cinéma, Paris 2002). See also a terminological compromise as suggested by Benning: "Lately, I've been calling *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* installation films that have been designed for the cinema. Hopefully, an audience will adopt the mentality of an installation with the awareness that this is a film that has duration, a beginning and an end. It's not something that you just wander in and out." In: Ian Hayden Smith, "Lost Landscapes, Found Paintings. Two New Films by James Benning," *Vertigo*, vol. 2, no. 9 (Autumn/Winter 2005), p. 6.

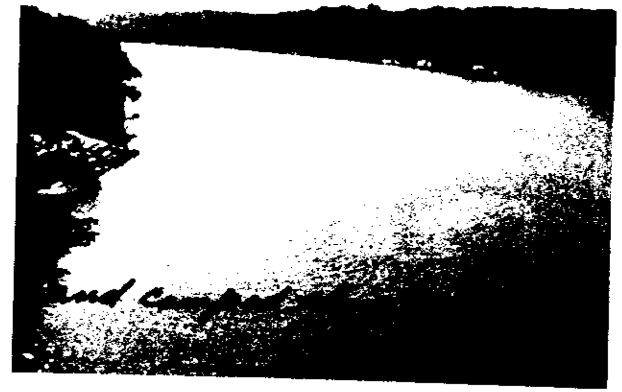
12) Dick Hebdige, "Reeling in Utah: The Travel Log Trilogy," reprint from *Afterall*, no. 8 (2003), in this volume, pp. 130–154.

were presented.[13] Diederichsen's observation was that, despite their formal affinity, the films provoked entirely different reactions among the audience. *Teatro Amazonas*, with its 40-minute shot of an audience in the opera house at Manaos, was received with skepticism by cinephiles. Meanwhile, spectators coming from a visual art background were inclined to take Lockhart's conceptual framework into consideration, even if it remains invisible in the film itself. Diederichsen explains the difference as follows: "During the discussions about Lockhart or Benning, it was notable that for the film faction, the filmed and projected image was the ultimate measure in arguing the case as to whether a film work was seen as successful or not. Conceptual arrangements like Benning's materially determined decisions as to the duration of single images from his 'California Trilogy' lost their relevance during the discussion. The author found greater significance in the specific shooting locations, unforeseen events, wind, trains passing: contingency as a guaranteed proof of reality. In contrast, Lockhart's defenders insisted upon the importance of quantitatively substantial and conceptually meaningful pre-production work. The artist filmed an audience that was chosen according to a very precise set of socio-cultural ramifications, and representative of various sociologically and ethnographically researched parts of the city—this in turn took months of historical preparatory work and on-site interviews by a team of specialists. None of this is visible when one watches the shot, when one simply honors the subtleties captured by the camera in the film's 45 minutes."[14]

Diederichsen's point can be helpful, even if it does not apply to each and every viewer. I, for example, enjoyed both films very much, despite the impatience cultivated by festival business. These potentially different experiences of films made by Lockhart and Benning are paralleled by the filmmakers' different approaches to the production process. For what is notable about Sharon Lockhart's works is that the film projected in the screening space is only one, albeit perhaps central, part of the production. It is accompanied by production stills and diverse paratexts that are exhibited in galleries or published in artist monographs and catalogues. Works like *Teatro Amazonas* or *Pine Flat* (US 2006)

13) In regard to the friendship/cooperative relationship between Lockhart and Benning, see Sharon Lockhart's contribution in this volume, pp. 55–64, and Benning's statements about the potential of a collaborative project in Julia Bantzer/Stefan Flach, "A Talk with James Benning," *shomingeki*, no. 16 (Spring/Summer 2005), p. 61.

14) Diedrich Diederichsen, "Von den Aufgaben der Bilder," *taz* (April 16, 2003).



North on Evers (1991)

are thus from the beginning conceived of as an ensemble of artifacts, as a discursive network with different outputs and addressees. This diversification allows for multiple approaches to the work and eases the viewer's 'access'.

Benning is likewise enroute with a camera before the actual filmmaking begins: but he doesn't actually take any photographs. The camera simply functions as a passe-partout to simulate the framing of the image. Furthermore, he makes due without accompanying publications in which, for example, California's politics in regard to water are elucidated, politics which provide the conceptual matrix for the 'California Trilogy'. The quotes from the *New York Times* that provide the textual commentary for *Deseret* are also not gathered together anywhere for the record. What emerges and becomes visible are only the shots of the film on a reel of 16mm, and no supplementary material whatsoever. It is upon the basis of this asceticism that Benning variously speaks of the 'essence' of the image[15] and thereby emphatically means the moving and projected image that is presented in the cinema. His approach is more purist than that of Lockhart, but I do not believe that his confinement to the 16mm film strip boils down to an ontology of the medium in terms of the cinematic image.

It is true that Benning's conceptual interventions and preparations during his filmmaking years (I'm familiar with 15 films from the last 30 years) have gradually moved into the background and the work has increasingly reduced itself to determining the duration of the shots. At the same time, it is clear that the 'simplicity' that is palpable derives from complexities through which it has passed. It is evident in the more recent films that they are consequences of the former experiments about the relationship between text and image (like in *North on Evers*) or image and language (like in *UTOPIA*). This is why a return to the image is not really a reduction but rather a liberation, a matter of concentration rather than a turning away. In this sense, Benning's aesthetic consistency can be sharply distinguished from aestheticism. Benning discovers political moments in the world he depicts and they can be gleaned from a "mindful contemplation of his films (the opposite of sentimental indulgence)."[16]

15) As in various Q&As after presentations of his films.

16) Jakob Hesler, "El Valley Centro," *filmtext*, http://filmtext.com/start.jsp?mode=2&lett=E&archiv=140.

Benning's idea of the filmmaking process also belongs to this context: The decision to film a given landscape, the concept of framing an image, the determination of the shot's duration, are permanently coupled with questions of history, politics, and work. The ongoing work of the image, and also the landscape's sedimentary layers of the past, seep into the image, one way or another. Benning explains this when talking about a shot from *Sogobi*: "I decided on a container ship, because of the politics of container ships, the way they work, the way they feed into capitalism. So I drove to San Francisco and spent two days waiting for ships to come off the horizon. I would first see them out there two hours away and then I would guess where to position the camera to film them coming out from under the bridge. I'm not sure anybody would read that shot in a political way out of context. But in the context of *Sogobi*, when the ship arrives at that point in the film, it becomes very political. I'm not at all disappointed if nobody else sees it because it basically was first made for my own thinking—for myself. But even if these things aren't explicit in the work, those things still bubble up in the work, add to the richness of the work. I make works that certainly have to do with aesthetics, but I am very conscious of how those images function politically, socially and personally."[17]

It is hard to imagine how such 'bubbles' become visible. Clearly this would necessitate a kind of chemical reaction between the production process, the film and the viewer that is difficult to calculate. It is easier to speak about the perceptions that Bennings films elicit.

III.

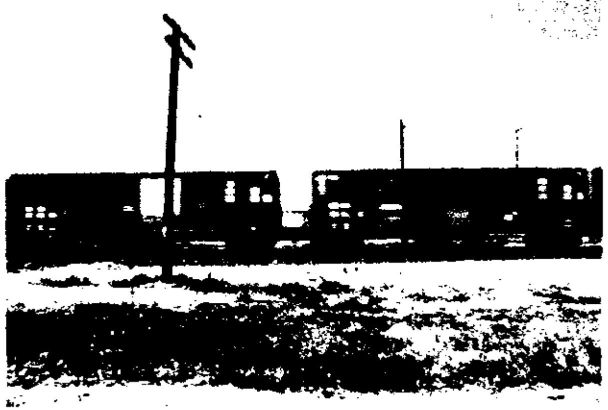
What connects Benning's films beyond the possibility of their stark differences is their character as travelogues or road movies, which takes me back to the beginning of my essay. For me, the black frames between the lakes in *13 LAKES* were not nothing, even upon initial viewing. Instead they embodied the distance covered between locations, they contained thousands of kilometers, the hefty motor noise of Benning's car, the highways and country roads, the dirt roads leading to the various lakes—preserved like in a locked and light-tight container. They were the vessels for the interminable transiting

17) James Benning, "Durch Null dividieren," in Pichler/Pollach (eds.), *moving landscapes. Landschaft und Film* (Vienna: Synema Publikationen, 2006), p. 203. Compare this orientation also with Nils Plath, "On Future Arrivals of Container Drivers. Five Brief Comments on One Image from James Benning's 'California Trilogy', expanded," in this volume, pp. 193–217.

of the landscape recounted by Dick Hebdige in his essay about a few days he shared with Benning. If one describes the 13 shots as static (meaning that the camera doesn't move), one not only overlooks how much movement takes place within the shot itself—especially the movement of light. One also ignores the dynamic between the shots—and as I indicated from the beginning, the dynamics of resumptions, of connections and anticipations between different films. A combine harvester that rolls through a film from the 70s could reemerge in one from the 90s, just like the cars and trains that cross through Benning's films, like the continent itself. I would finally like to describe a couple of observations that have to do with this idea of transportation and its specific temporality.

A heavy limousine with curvacious fenders, chromed armatures and white rimmed tires is standing on a dirt road. Two wooden buildings can be seen in the background, possibly barns. Two silos can partially be perceived on the right hand side of the image. We hear the sound of a train rattling along somewhere—perhaps behind the camera— in any case, invisible to us. A countryside idyll precisely located through the fade-up of a superimposed title now appears: Milwaukee 1942. We are at the year of the filmmaker's birth, at the location of his childhood. A quick pan to the left sets in. We lose sight of the shining car as a skyline enters the picture—even a viewer not well acquainted with American geography would have difficulty associating this skyline with Milwaukee. A minor irritation ensues, but as the pan reaches its end, the skyscrapers of a big city can clearly be recognized. The sound of the province has also imperceptibly transformed into the noise of a major metropolis, and again a superimposed title appears that completely cancels out what was seen a few seconds prior: 'New York 1980'. What now? Where are we? In what period does the story claim to be immersed? This camera pan in *Him and Me* characterizes one of the elemental functions of filmic practice—it couldn't be more simple and at the same time it cuts a hole in the narrative. Once again, as with the circular pan in *Grand Opera*, two places and two times are elegantly connected and simultaneously isolated from one another, through the baffling simplicity of a camera movement.

What is heard off screen in *Him and Me* is visualized in the 'California Trilogy'. A train crosses through the Californian landscape. *El Valley Centro*, shot number 6. The camera is set up parallel to the train tracks. At first, nothing can be heard, but then a locomotive whistles and after ten seconds the protagonist of the



El Valley Centro (1999)

shot enters the scene from the right: a seemingly never-ending train. One wagon after another rolls into the picture, dividing the shot horizontally. Their colors are luminous and astounding—rich, primary colors alternate with the brown colors of freight cars. Some of the cars are simply shells through which one can see the landscape in the background. The promising sign 'Pacific' can be recognized. It seems to me as if Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptualism all meet in this one, simple shot. And the determination of the shot's duration additionally contributes a specific, almost slapstick sense of suspense. One knows that the shot will end after 150 seconds and imagines that the train will have to behave accordingly. Will it succeed in driving through the entirety of the image and disappear stage-left, leaving the scene as empty as in the beginning. One can also get lost in thought: How many conflicts took place around the planning and construction of the railroad that cuts through the North American continent? In how many Westerns is the conflict of this furrow chiseled into the landscape? Settlers wait for the railroad to come, others want to prevent it, one hopes for the economic strength it will bring. And, like other 19th century discoveries, the view from and sight of the train stands for a new, dynamic perceptual disposition to which cinema is closely related.

One has time to contemplate such matters as one train car after another rattles into the picture from right to left, and it is a pleasure to find a kind of counter-shot to this image in the 29th shot of *Sogobi*. Once again a train appears, but this time it emerges from the deep space on the left of the screen. It approaches upon a track bending along a lengthy curve, one reads a sign that says 'Santa Fe', and this time there is no chance that the countless train cars could fit into the two and a half minutes. The edit unhitches the train, but one can rest assured: The train will be continued in another film by James Benning.

Translated by Eve Heller

Nils Plath

On Future Arrivals of Container Drivers

Five Brief Comments on One Image from James Benning's 'California Trilogy', expanded

1. From There to Here

On November 5, 1880 Karl Marx added a request to a letter he sent from London to Friedrich Adolph Sorge in Hoboken, New Jersey: "I would be very pleased if you could dig up something good (of significance) about the economic conditions in California, at my expense, of course. California is very important to me, for nowhere else has capitalist centralization caused such perfectly radical change in such a shameless way—and with such haste."[1]

John Muir arrived in California in 1868, and, over the course of time, became one of the West's great environmentalists. Fourteen years after Marx's transatlantic correspondence, in 1894, Muir published *The Mountains of California*. He finds a clearly different point of view from which to describe the California landscape: "Perched like a fly on this Yosemite dome, I gaze and sketch and bask, oftentimes settling down into dumb admiration without definite hope of ever learning much (…), humbly prostrate before the vast display of God's power, and eager of self-denial and renunciation with eternal toil to learn any lesson in the divine manuscript."[2]

These two historical descriptions make it apparent that a country is like a landscape set in the midst of various correlations of utilization. A country, like a landscape, can only be perceived within contexts that bear witness to an intriguing relationship between absence from and presence in a given place.[3] This relationship is conveyed by written descriptions and their accompanying visual images, both of which should be read as narratives.[4] In the case of Marx's postscript, which includes his request for archeological discoveries, the country functions as a brand name for remarkable realities with

1) Karl Marx, letter to Adolph Sorge, 5 November 1880, in: *Werke. Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels*, vol. 34 (Berlin: Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, 1966), p. 478.

2) John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (New York: Penguin 1997 [1911]), p. 132.

3) For an illustrative overview from an art historical perspective of how art forms corresponded to the need for territorial demarcation, see Martin Warnke, *Political Landscape. The Art History of Nature* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994).

4) The transportation of views and hence of perspective-shaping theory must always show us border demarcations and territorial appropriations. As J. Hillis Miller has it in his *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), pp. 4-5: "[T]here is always a figure in the landscape. (…) Though they may not all seem at first to be connected to mappings of some landscape, imaginary or real, it is easy to see, for example, that the question of speech acts comes up in investigating what is involved in the naming of places (…) The question of transporting or translating theory from one country to another raises the question of the degree to which a given theory is rooted in one particular culture, able to function only in a specific place."

extraordinarily strong socio-economic characteristics; in the case of Muir, the country is regarded as an incomparable object of aesthetic reflection, expressed in a language that seems to be related to the language of American transcendentalism, with its focus on divine experience rather than divine authority. Here, in the case of Marx, a country is treated as a totality, as an abstract space. It is also exemplary of a development that occurs in other places at a comparably lesser speed, although still according to the same laws over which the individual has absolutely no control. There, with Muir, the landscape is captured in words, as a kind of perspective excerpted by an individual from a larger impression, for the purpose of observing intangible greatness and internal sensation. Here, with Marx, a country or state seems to represent the fabricated result of time passing at a particularly rapid pace, the manifestation of continual changes evoked by externally determined circumstances that violently force the reshaping of landscape. There, with Muir, the visible landscape stands for the permanence of divine nature and an order above and beyond time, in the face of which, the lone human being must perceive his finite nature and meaninglessness, while at the same, he is driven by the imperative to document, through art, the perception of his condition as an element of the landscape.

Twelve decades later, in the landscape images of his 'California Trilogy', filmmaker James Benning developed his own way to illustrate these corresponding descriptions of California as of the late 1990s. Land and landscape are framed, austerely formatted, and standardized in a sequence of images recorded onto film. Originally from Wisconsin, Benning has been an outsider at home in southern California since the late 1980s. Produced in series form, his films are critical visual examinations of landscapes. At the same time the films depict an evocation of the aesthetic transcendence of individually experienced environments. Hence, the moving stills produce prospects of *his* California—since the trilogy can also be seen as a self-portrait—and of *a* California. Both 'views' of California can be seen in other places simultaneously (as a concept) and belatedly (as the materiality of filmic images that restore the past), so that more than just an image of this land and its landscape is left behind.

Benning confirmed this during a lecture in Vienna in 2004 about his filmmaking methods and how he observes himself in the process. He pointed out the importance of tradition and the creation of values, the process of framing historical spaces in order to narrate the story of a land,

and the significance of either placing himself within the frame of a filmed location or passing through it when creating images that include his person. Benning opened these remarks with a reference to the writings of John Muir: "When I started to do research for *Sogobi*, which is the third film of the 'California Trilogy', the part of the trilogy that is a portrait of landscapes, one of the first things I did was to read the works of John Muir, the nineteenth-century naturalist. And his descriptions of landscapes and wilderness were very precise. His readings, uhm, I mean, writings lead to the development of the National Park System in the US at the time, so they are very valuable documents at this time."[5]

In other words, prospects of landscapes taken from books about nature accompany Benning when he goes out into nature to develop his perceptions. His impressions of the location, in which he is both physical body and observer, continue along the paths of two traditions. Benning's images can be seen as taking part in a project widely underway during the nineteenth century, one that turned landscape and wilderness into objects of description, thus applying Rousseau's widely accepted distinction between nature and culture to the so-called 'new continent'. This continent gradually developed over the course of the century, and the close of its frontier was confirmed in the words of a second Wisconsin native who established yet another myth about the formation of American identity.[6] As the first Wisconsin native mentioned here, Benning has his own way of transforming descriptions of landscape into documents that will survive the ravages of time because they provide a critical commentary on the appropriation of landscape. Benning's own appropriation of the land can be described as a process of reading landscape images: when the landscape is turned into a topic of representation, it is always in the picture, captured in the frame.

5) Transcript of a lecture by James Benning, "Dividing by Zero," held at the Austrian Film Museum in Nov 2004; excerpts published in German as "Durch Null dividieren," in Pichler/Pollach (eds.), *moving landscapes. Landschaft und Film* (Vienna: Synema Publikationen, 2006), pp. 197–208. Benning names other role models for his films, such as mathematical equations, songs (such as Lucinda Williams' "Lake Charles"), or paintings by artists of the Hudson River School.

6) Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his now famous paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. He described the 'frontier' as the territory between urbanized, civilized society and the untamed wilderness. He also labeled this frontier experience a key component in the formation of American identity, part of a rejection of the influences of outdated European civilizations. See i.e. Allen G. Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner, Strange Roads Going Down* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); John Mack Faragher (ed.), *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

His involuntary slip during the lecture, when he mentioned Muir's 'readings' of the landscape, but meant his 'writings', is not insignificant. Benning shows how difficult—perhaps impossible—it is to sharply distinguish between perceptive observation and the reiteration of recordings wherever they are made visible. This is especially the case when one finds oneself either in the context of the landscape itself, or lecturing about the landscape while in the context of different venues. In other words, landscape is always simultaneously read and written whenever and wherever a person places himself in it through the use of words and images.

2. Looking Down from Above

At first sight, just a still image shot on the diagonal, a view from above a mostly blue surface: a moving, watery surface is seen. A broad, shadowy line overlaps the lower edge of the picture while two thin, barely perceptible, linear shadows run parallel through the frame. This shot is from *Sogobi*, the third film of the 'California Trilogy'. It was filmed with a static camera, like all the other shots. It is more than just a random image, since it includes a form of filmic self-reflection: the camera (and therefore the viewer) stares at a watery surface—considering what there is to be seen, it takes more than a moment to orient oneself. This is the fifteenth shot in *Sogobi* and appears more than thirty minutes into the film. Preceding images consistently featured a horizontal landscape and the viewer oriented his gaze accordingly. This shot breaks the pattern: it confuses the eye, expressing a disturbance in the mathematical strictness of the film's structure and thus commenting on the format of the prior images. The viewer is hereby made aware of perceptual conditions. Yet it is not immediately obvious what kinds of visual and proportional relationships are being set up within the image. Nothing immediately betrays the real size of what appears in the frame. A film in which landscape is always and solely present in a series of images makes it clear how dependent a viewer is on both perception and modes of mediated communication. In the above case, the eye keenly detects this dependency. The ensuing images show completely different views of a land portrayed as a singular entity, yet composed of heterogeneous shots of the landscape. Only after long periods of time—during which the viewer has become accustomed to seeing nothing more than obscure reflections of light on a restless surface of water—does an object suddenly enter the image from the right-hand side of the image. This moment is a definite surprise, because stillness

dominates the scenery in *Sogobi*. In most shots, changes often occur in a barely perceptible way, and are then contrasted to images that feature repetitive, automatic motions (construction and agricultural machines at work, cars on streets, freight trains moving in and out of the picture). Although not initially discernable, because it simply appears as a shadow jutting into the image, the object gradually penetrating the frame can finally be identified as a freighter laden with containers. Once it slides completely into view, the color of the container ship makes it look like some sort of foreign body. This in turn allows the composed image to be recognized for what it is: the ship moving within a still frame defined by the motionless camera. Time passes quickly. The freighter rapidly moves out of the picture, disappearing almost as soon as it has completely filled the frame and leaving behind an image with altered coordinates. The trace of a whitecap on the formerly all-blue, moving surface is seen. It lasts a few seconds, presenting a visible recollection of the no-longer-visible means of transport: a recollection that will also disappear. And yet, in the eye of the beholder, nothing is as it was before.

This sequence ends as abruptly as it began. It is two-and-a-half-minutes long, like all of the shots in the 'California Trilogy'. Only during the final credits, when the locations in *Sogobi* are listed, is it revealed that the shot was taken from the Golden Gate Bridge and that the ship was a freighter belonging to the Hanjin Shipping Company. This (belated) localization explains the barely visible, shadowy lines, and single-handedly transforms the individual shot into a component of a particular narrative. The identification of the bridge by name reveals a deliberately chosen perspective; a means of transport, the property of a company that operates worldwide, is consciously brought into the picture, while the location of the viewer as its observer on the bridge is put into perspective. Other Benning films contain corresponding images: in *El Valley Centro* there is a shot of a freighter moving through the landscape of California's Central Valley, the agro-industrial landscape portrayed in the film. *Los*, a portrait of Los Angeles and its surroundings, presents the harbor of San Pedro. The films in Benning's trilogy contain many correspondences of this kind—topographies seen again and again, shots of streets, rivers, creeks, intersecting paths, trees, or large signs. Benning creates montages of images and text in his other films of the West—such as *Deseret* (1995) or *Four Corners* (1997), for instance, which evoke memories of Babette Mangolte's more epic travel narrative, *The Sky on Location* (1982). Unspoken

references to texts by others are likewise consistently present in images of the trilogy, which feature only buildings and vehicles, or even simply vegetation. And yet, this visible non-presence of writing and words in the film makes the human presence in the landscape all the more apparent. This is how the presence of history is continuously maintained when 'nature' is shown as a result of image production. As means of transportation, as metaphors in an empirical reality, both bridge and ship are actually not meant to determine perspectives, but to transport things, bridge distances, connect landscapes.[7] What do they reveal in the single shot under discussion? What do they allow to be seen? Without actually being in the picture, the bridge as location determines this single, particular image, which subsequently comments upon other images in the series: the Golden Gate Bridge as scenic viewpoint—the tourist's take on San Francisco,[8] the perspective of tourists on the beaten path, in pursuit of stereotypes and clichés representative of the city. Visual fantasies and narratives of freedom become reality, while simultaneously attaching themselves to a marked place, turning a structure, which also happens to be an emblem, into a location some seek out in order to jump. In Benning's film, the eye does not catch sight of the city.[9] This is a

7) And even though they are used as means of transportation, both bridge and ship have had a long history of serving as symbols—to name only what are perhaps the most prominent discussions of the twentieth century: Martin Heidegger's "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), and "Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," in Theodor W. Adorno/Max Horkheimer *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

8) Alfred Hitchcock utilizes this bridge as a prominent set piece in one of his films (*Vertigo*, USA 1958), as famously commented upon by Chris Marker (*Sans Soleil*, France 1983). In doing this, Hitchcock (unlike Benning) views the Bay Area with the eyes of a tourist, as Thom Andersen has it in the commentary of his seminal portrait of a city in moving pictures. *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (USA 2003): "Just as there are highbrows and lowbrows, there are high tourists and low tourists. Just as there are highbrow directors and lowbrow directors, there are high tourist directors and low tourist directors. Low tourist directors generally disdain Los Angeles. They prefer San Francisco and the coastline of northern California. More picturesque. The greatest low tourist director is, of course, Alfred Hitchcock, and he set four memorable films around the San Francisco Bay Area."

9) The city that likes to be referred to as 'The City (by the Bay)', San Francisco, is not only known as one of the most-photographed cities in the world, it is also one of the first American cities shot in panorama format. See for example William Shaw, *San Francisco from Rincon Point* (ca. 1852), George R. Fardon, *San Francisco Album: Photographs of the Most Beautiful Views and Public Buildings of San Francisco* (1856), Carleton E. Watkins, *View from San Francisco from the Base of Twin Peaks* (1866–74), and Eadweard Muybridge's *Panorama Images of the City* (1877, 1878). For a depiction and discussion of San Francisco, see Peter B. Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839–1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).

statement in itself: there is the water, and there is the transportation route clearly marking the ship as a ship per se by deliberately placing it in the image,[10] and yet, at the same time, making the ship exemplary. The San Francisco Bay is also a harbor, a gateway to the world, a docking point for immigration narratives coming west from the Far East, which lies westward. The Oakland harbor lies in the distance, on the other side of the bay—its unique landscape is not included in *Sogobi*. Oakland is currently the fourth-largest harbor in the United States and one of the twenty biggest harbors in the world, a place where goods from all over the world find port, a destination inscribed in the topography of global trade routes.[11] San Francisco harbor thus takes the form of a place and a history—two sides simultaneously present, yet rarely obvious to the consciousness of those who try to gain a perspective from on top of the bridge.

10) And at the same time, the ship visible in the moving image can also be looked upon as a reference to Peter Hutton's film, *Study of a River* (USA 1996).

11) See *Pacific Gateway: An Illustrated History of the Port of Oakland, Woodruff Minor* (Oakland: Port of Oakland, 2000)

12) Karl Marx, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels. Collected Works, vol. 28 (trans. Ernst Wangermann, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), pp. 49–537; originally written in German between 1857 and 1861 and published as *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*.

4. Futurity in Use

Where image meets landscape, the topic becomes individual property rights. These necessarily renewable claims to space and time need media in order to be delineated, communicated, preserved, and continually re-presented. Claims need time in order to be established, as well as revoked and contested. Claims need containers in which to be kept, so that they can be re-published, re-assessed, re-read in the form of images. Storage places are sought where they can also manifest their own claims over time and demonstrate their relevance to what can be called proper identities of communality. That requires some work, as one might imagine. Karl Marx's manuscript, "Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie," written between October 1857 and May 1858, is a rough draft of his major work, *Das Kapital*.[12] Here, the author indirectly speaks of the availability of land as property, as well as the claims to it as claims to property in general. He identifies one of the crucial conditions of capital as the separation of free labor from the objective conditions of its realization. For Marx, this dissolution is a backdrop that arises from the division between "the means of labour and the material of labour." He explains that the worker lives an object-related existence in front of this backdrop:

"Hence the labourer has an objective existence independent of his labour. The individual relates to himself as proprietor, as master of the conditions of his reality."[13] Here, the context maintained expresses something about the attitude of a proprietor and how circumstances of time and place determine his conditions. Benning presents himself as someone who questions and affirms the right to possess something, that is, landscape: despite the fact that it is shown as an image to a general audience, landscape cannot actually be turned into property.

Even the undeniable fact that property ownership is registered and documented in land registries—thus clarifying and proving property rights over time—does not contradict this assertion. In his images, his own view of landscape, Benning shows something that he also wants to have understood as a collective fact. Landscape exists only as it is claimed by many (and by a multitude of collective histories), and therefore as an historical condition. Hence, the possession of landscape is never final, and its use is always a process, a series of ways of utilizing it. Landscape must be received in order to produce an image of time. While the body serves as a temporary storage medium for impressions, while it can be visible in the landscape, it will ultimately disappear from the scene, for its physicality is finite. It is precisely this fact that also makes it necessary to store impressions outside of one's own body, so that these impressions can be taken to other places and other times. This idea can be seen as a motif in Benning's filmic work—the formation of the self as a recording medium that needs another medium in order to gain a place in time. As John Muir finally wrote several decades after his trip to the Californian mountains: "Never while anything is left of me shall this first camp be forgotten. It has fairly grown into me, not merely as memory pictures, but as part and parcel of mind and body alike." In other words, without what "is left of me," namely, his words and his sketches of Sierra vegetation printed in his book (as a message), there would be nothing left anywhere else: no trace of what he described, according to his impression, as "eternal-enduring."[14]

In a very similar way, Benning stakes claim to the landscape depicted; it must be stored (on film) to be distributed, yet it will nonetheless never belong to him or be his alone. Moving pictures are his only means of both manifesting a claim and expressing it in representative

13) Marx, *Outlines*, p. 399.

14) Muir, *First Summer*, p. xi.

terms, in locations very different than those seen in the films—that is, in movie theaters in the many different towns, cities, countries, and continents where his images of California are shown. His images prove that places and representative spaces have their histories of use (and thus their temporal value).[15]

As a filmmaker, it appears that Benning is interested in coming to terms with the relationship between the internal (so-called organic) and external (so-called structural) characteristics of whatever he portrays. He achieves this by rediscovering himself as an observer in the landscape, by making an image of it for others, as a perceptive being in space, as someone absorbing impressions in the landscape. For Benning, what is seen and shown are each the result of labor, of the process of developing a stance toward one's surroundings—the outcome of laborious processes of development, in a very real sense of the word: the history of film as the development of technology, as both aesthetic and political. To bear witness means to depend upon a futurity which one has to create oneself, with one's own images, to explore past formats of perception.

In his "Grundrisse," Marx describes "the communality [*Gemeinschaftlichkeit*] of blood, language, customs," represented "in the clan society," as the primary prerequisite for the (temporary) communal appropriation and use of land. The *earth*, writes Marx, is "the original instrument of labour, both as workshop and repository of raw materials; however, appropriation not by means of labour but as the prerequisite of labour. The individual relates simply to the objective conditions of labour as his own, as the inorganic nature of his subjectivity, which realizes itself through them. The chief objective condition of labour does not itself appear as the *product* of labour, but is already there as nature [or divine presuppositions]."[16]

Of significance here is the appearance of the word 'appear': that is, the conditions required for display are not simply fact, but have to be regarded as a process involving modes of representation.

Both Benning and Marx want the seemingly obvious assumption that nature is naturally given (or God-given, as Muir had it) and, conversely, that culture is cultivated and hence historical, to appear as nothing but the construct of

15) History and utilization of landscape, commented accordingly, could be turned into ideologically critical picture books. See, for example, Robert Dawson, Gray Brechin, *Farewell, Promised Land. Waking from the California Dream* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1999).

16) Marx, *Outlines*, p. 409.

relationships in which one's own production—the production of the self—expires with time.

Thus it might be that the task is to show signs of wear when depicting landscape; and perhaps this task should be carried on in a kind of futurity—the future seen as a manifestation of the representation of things past. Collected images speak to this idea. A chapter heading in a book published decades ago and re-read in many ways displays a related message, translated from the French: "Wears and tears (tableau of an ageless world)."[17] Time leaves behind temporary traces—that is nothing new. Surfaces can be described—literally for inscription—to be inscribed. And each of the reading modalities that corresponds to its own place in history can be read from their inscription. Furrows and traces, those are signs of the time the reader will find. A wake as reminder. Thus writes a reader who understands Marx as the originator of the "wears and tears (tableau of an ageless world)." The book in question, *Of Grammatology*, was published in French a year before the Paris uprisings of May 1968. In it, Jacques Derrida included some sections that can be placed in direct context with a discussion about gestures of articulation, the formation of language based on material conditions, and the questioning of linearities in the application of different historical kinds of writing. For Walter Benjamin, the narrator's perception of his own landscape was an important task as well as a cultural asset (albeit outdated by his time), for an oral-narrative sense of communality transmitted over time.[18] In contrast, Derrida looks at representational modes of writing, cultivated by eye and hand. "The visual economy of reading obeys a law analogous to that of agriculture," Derrida says after establishing the different directions motion can take as one reads and is involved in the system of writing, which is determined by the hand. He then speaks of an unstable compromise between these two economic prescriptions: "The same thing is not true of the manual economy of writing and the latter was predominant during a specific era and period of the great phonographic-linear epoch. The wake [fashion] outlives the conditions of its necessity: it continued till the age of printing. Our writing and our reading are still largely determined by the movement of the hand."[19] There, as here, the divided presence of processes of exchange determines the relationship between a settled existence and subjects as 'transported beings' [*Transportwesen*, in German] in a different way than it used to just a few decades ago. Derrida's words serve as a reminder that one needs to pay attention to the manual, to the hand, and the instability involved in continuing to write in linear fashions. What is at stake is the notion of working with one's hands; the manifestations of appropriation produced by grasping and comprehending, which appear in the face of a determinist use of language; the dictates of a kind of instrumentalization of manual work; and the resistance stemming from one's own obstinacy. The ability to act—and to write—and therefore to manifest wealth, property, competence.

17) Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx, the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994).

18) In his "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin describes two exemplary figures, through which experience is passed from person to person. "If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman (...) The resident master craftsman and the traveling journeymen worked together before he settled down in his home town or somewhere else. If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place." Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections* (trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 84–85.

Derrida expatiates on the traces left by the utilization of land: "The furrow is the line, as the ploughman traces it: the road—via rupta—broken by the ploughshare. The furrow of agriculture, we remind ourselves, opens nature to culture (cultivation). And one also knows that writing is born with agriculture which happens only with sedentarization (...)."[20]

Derrida expatiates on the traces left by the utilization of land: "How does the ploughman proceed? Economically. Arrived at the end of the furrow, he does not return to the point of departure. He turns the ox and ploughs around (...) writing by furrows was a movement in linear and phonographic script. (...) Why, however, is the ensuing question, did the economy of the writer break with that of the agriculturalist?"[21]

This question had to be reintroduced, owing to the new conditions brought about by changed ways of writing in an era of altered transportation. When writing, setting down the hand or lifting it again produces gaps in time, moments in which linearity stops, creating time for reflection in the leap from line to line.

A closer look makes it easier to see how Derrida's remarks on the traditions of writing are in conjunction with the model of land use appearing in Benning's image. In their images of ground conditions, both are concerned with

19) Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), p. 288. [Translation slightly altered, N.P.]

20) Ibid., p. 287.

21) Ibid., p. 287.

how temporary signs of usage are perceived. Both are concerned with new technologies used in production and transportation, and the question of the economic usage of time and the future. Derrida's passage addresses the same topic of future arrivals by means of economically determined processes in the same way that Benning stages it in his image of the bridge. What is at stake is the notion of linearization, literally, which actually means: material, furrows and wakes, strips of film, passages of time; the media that transport places and times, which—in the case of the world conveyed by the film through a series of still shots, and its fragmented descriptions of perception—is an opportunity to reflect on proprietary conditions and the ability to represent, portray, and depict sensory impressions. There must be space in which to reflect upon images and time. And since this space has become historical, it is therefore possible to outline an idea of it. It is an inconstant, restless space, and yet one that has to be familiar with a certain kind of stasis in order to become a place where bodies can exist.[22] John Muir's words also reveal this relationship between standstill and motion so crucial to the perception of landscape, and they resonate in Benning's stationary images. Muir describes his record of the Sierra as a series of detailed observations of movement in nature—from trees swaying in the wind to raindrops falling from the sky. His description is embedded in a narrative which tells how he himself moves from one point to another in this natural landscape over the course of a summer, occasionally coming to rest, and yet still considering himself part of a divine plan for the orderly turn of nature's tides.

4. From There, Away

James Benning's three landscape films, *El Valley Centro, Los*, and *Sogobi*, present a three-part portrait of the 31st state of the union in the form of

22) "[T]he space of geometric objectivity is an object or an ideal signified produced at a moment of writing. Before it, there is no homogenous space, submitted to one and the same type of technique and economy. Before it, space orders itself wholly for the habitation and inscription in itself of the body 'proper'." (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 288) Possessive claims, physicality, and the idealized unity of the two, as well as the intactness that must be equally demanded of them—the sense of space—all of these assemble to form a concept. Therefore: when landscape comes to mind, it is about the body in space—one that has been put there. One that is in front of the us, forming a communal body, and yet absent, like a monument made to disappear into its surroundings, invisible to the eyes of passersby. A body that helps to define the space, even if invisible to itself. And thus the notion of landscape requires that the transportation of the body be reflected—something that requires work and creates a work—through the ages and from space to space.

an almost seamless network of individual shots of the Californian landscape. The films also show what it means to use time: they demand time. Their austere composition, which is also a practical calculation in many of Benning's films made since the 1970s, underscores this demand. Each of the three films consists of thirty-five 'static' shots, each about two-and-a-half minutes long—including the head and tail leaders, which simply display the title of the film and the list of final credits, including the name of the filmmaker and the film's locations. This results in a running time of ninety minutes for each film. The 'California Trilogy' is a unified whole: the last shot of the first film, *El Valley Centro*, is also the first shot of *Los*, the second film; the last shot of *Los* is the first shot of the final film of the series, *Sogobi*. And the final shot in *Sogobi* returns us to the first shot in *El Valley Centro*.[23] Benning's films are informed by structuralist film tradition and are uneconomical in a particularly pleasant and compelling way. They make the economies usually involved in viewing film and landscape more noticeable than usual. Benning counts on this, and obviously reckons with it by releasing his films to the cinema (and only to the cinema). Unlike the museum, for instance, the cinema makes it more difficult to escape the images, and each one is viewed in its entirety. His images require an investment of time, as well as attention to the passage of time. Time dominates each perspective of the landscape, which is always entropically (in Robert Smithson's sense of the word) conceived.[24]

Benning's films might attempt to expose how one's own image of landscape, as well as the collective image of it, is determined by parameters of perception. Instead, they challenge

23) While watching the trilogy, viewers might think they recognize famous scenes from Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (USA 1959) and from Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (USA 1970), for instance, when a crop duster flying over a field repeatedly flies toward the camera in *El Valley Centro*. Numerous filmic citations or allusions that seem like reconstructions in the documentary-like setting of the landscape give the trilogy a multiplicity of internal and external references.

24) This view is also a perquisite for interpreting landscape images that can convey an understanding of time as well as a discursive consciousness of history. See Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" (1968), in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 110: "The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth's crust. When one scans the ruined sites of pre-history one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upset our present art historical limits. A rubble of logic confronts the viewer as he looks into the levels of the sedimentations. The abstract grids containing the raw matter are observed as something incomplete, broken, shattered."

perception itself, revealing a knowledge of how to demonstrate that perception is constructed by conditional frameworks—assuming, of course, that one understands how to see landscape as a medium, that is, as a space in which time is transported. Even at the moment of filming on location, Benning's images of California become archival recordings in a series; they are not immortalized prospects of a singular landscape that regards itself as a sort of permanent present. Each of the images is already a reconstruction of a previous appropriation, not the representation of a present that is unique to the moment of its recording.[25]

What he attempts to capture in an image is an impression of landscape that is acquired in an encounter with the place itself and from a particular angle.[26] No impression ever arrives and remains all by itself. It is the medium that first provides a historicity for the mediated, serialized impressions. The 'today' of the nineteenth century clearly continues to inform James Benning's images with a certain perspective, and between these two 'todays' are photographs, films, and texts that are archived, told and retold, shown and shown again. Between the 'yesterday' of Benning's images and the 'today' of each presentation and projection in other places, there are new and more recently seen images, images that have transformed the Californian landscape into a projection surface that remains and will continue to remain a medium called 'California'—one that continues to appear as a single, permanent image despite its factual usage, exploitation, and alteration over the course of time. This medium called 'California' manifests as a permanent projection, a surface for self-renewing claims and views.[27] Even Benning's images are part of a catalogue of a California in pictures, which remains the place for the fulfillment of what one thinks one sees in its so-called natural land-

25) The way that various times intersect in film is paradoxical, since the presence maintained in all of the medium's temporality is already past the moment it has been seen; the present always has to be addressed as an event that is already over at the moment it becomes present. It is this experience that first makes it possible to have the essential experience of differentiating between seeing and showing, which in turn makes it possible to recognize the difference between the place where something has been shot (the place of seeing) and the place where it is shown (the place of showing)—the liminal space where the world presents itself to the audience in the present mode.

26) In this respect, it is significant that Benning adds to the uncommented images a soundtrack recorded where the images where filmed. Yet he does not frequently use tracks that have been simultaneously recorded along with the images on screen; instead, he uses remixed tracks with obviously intensified acoustics. Benning's images do not attempt to sell authenticity in their documentation of an individual impression of a place.

scapes, its urban spaces, and its post-urban settlements: the presence of the future as a day-to-day, new, unfulfilled promise, while, in the meanwhile, time passes by untouched. California always seems to be reproducing representations of itself—a landscape consisting of light and sound—in images, writing, and sound, sustaining an enormous economy by producing reproductions of itself.[28] Images of landscape represent a land as something that is coming, but has yet to arrive in other places, including the utopias that have already passed on. These images are in permanent circulation around the world, filled with meanings that are interpreted very differently in different places.

27) It might be tempting to assign each of the moving pictures in the trilogy to an image from the extensive archives of California's photographic history, such as the harbor views from Henry A. Hussey's *Bone Yard* (1926), or the many natural monuments photographed by those such as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, the previously mentioned Eadweard Muybridge, and Carleton E. Watkins, or Dorothea Lange's straight photography, which can be regarded as models for Benning's moving still lifes of landscapes (as documented in, for example, Richard Rodriguez/Sandra Phillips et al [eds.], *Crossing the Frontier. Photographs of the Developing West, 1849 to the Present* [San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996]). Benning's images, however, are extraordinarily filmic, as they reproduce and document the passage of time in the image (the landscape), which is (repeatedly) seen every time the film is projected. This is what makes them significantly different from the photographs, as recordings of moments, photographs depict passages of time, but cannot create an experience of temporality and finality that goes beyond a single moment, while at the same time reflecting their reproduction or their impossibility.

28) Stephanie Barron/Sheri Bernstein/Ilene Susan Fort (eds.), *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity 1900–2000* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2000).

29) For an account of contemporary photographic images documenting the effects of global trade under new technological conditions, see: Thomas Seelig/Urs Stahel/Martin Jaeggi (eds.), *Trade. Waren, Wege und Werte im Welthandel heute* (Zürich: Scalo, 2001).

5. From the Inside to the Outside

English language dictionaries first began including the following entry in the 1960s: *container*, derived from the Latin word *continere*, meaning *to hold in* and *to hold together*. The word describes a vessel standardized for the process of speedy and simple global trade.[29] It also spells nothing less than the end of the dichotomy between land and sea: "The key technical innovation (...) is the containerization of cargo movement: an innovation pioneered initially by the United States shipping companies in the latter half of the 1950s, evolving into the world standard for general cargo by the end of the 1960s. By reducing loading and unloading time and greatly increasing the volume of cargo in global movement, containerization links peripheries to centers in a novel fashion, making it possible for industries formerly rooted to a center to

become restless and nomadic in their search for cheaper labor. Factories become mobile, ship-like, as ships become increasingly indistinguishable from trucks and trains, and seaways lose their difference with highways. (...) This historical change reverses the 'classical' relationship between the fixity of the land and the fluidity of the sea."[30]

It is the container, an apt neologism, which "made shipping cheap, and by doing so changed the shape of world economy."[31] In addition, it caused a re-evaluation of the fundamental difference (also previously crucial to a concept of landscape) between land and sea, between stasis and motion, forcing the concept of nature and its metaphorical relationship to change. Through the introduction of a new type of transportation, of all things—a functional, standardized container to transport and store goods, simply intended make the exchange of commodities more efficient—a crucial perspective used in an age-old debate of aesthetic concepts is brought into question: the notion that land and sea must be considered as separate from one another, or that they have to be taken as opposing figures in the visual world (and beyond). This notion must be looked upon with new uncertainty, thanks to a large container moving through space, whose contents are firmly enclosed and accompanied by shipping papers; a container that must first be opened up and its contents unloaded, so that its contents can be seen with one's own eyes, so that one can decide if one knows what to do with its contents.

When, in this one single image from Benning's trilogy, bridge and ship encounter each other for a brief moment, an encounter of two symbols representing the rapid passage of time also takes place. A first, fleeting look assumes that the stability of the bridge and the

30) Allan Sekula, "Dismal Science: Part 1," in: *Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter, 1995) p. 49.

31) Marc Levison, *The Box. How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 2. In his comprehensive history of container trade that started in 1956 and changed the way trade was carried on around the world, Levison describes the effects of this utilitarian object: "As the container made international transportation cheaper and more dependable, it lowered that barrier [of high transportation costs], decimating manufacturing employment in North American, Western Europe, and Japan, by making it much easier for manufacturers to go overseas in search of low-cost inputs. The labor-intensive assembly will be done in a low-wage country—but there are many low-wage countries." (p. 268) This development left its mark in the landscape: "Container shipping, it is clear, has helped some cities and countries become part of the new global supply chains, while leaving others to the side. It has assisted the rapid economic growth of Korea while offering precious little to Paraguay." (p. 271) Inscribed in the landscape, these histories—of individuals, of cities and harbors—continue to wait for their narrator.

motion of the ship are precise opposites, turning one into an outdated (because immobile) structure and the other into a contemporary mode of transportation. Yet this kind of juxtaposition does not attain the desired certainty of perception, given the fact that film is the medium of its conveyance. Bridge and ship no longer represent standstill and motion, and hence can no longer be regarded as opposing symbols, just as the landscape itself has long lost its symbolic unity. Both bridge and ship are means of transportation, objects to be observed in a time when impressions are acquired and processed, when it no longer seems possible to perceive the landscape itself, except in relation to the ways it is portrayed: as fragmented and constrained by time.

A landscape depicted on film and hence consisting of a series of moving images—as an excerpt from a larger section of the landscape—can be regarded as a consequence of the conditions of transportation and norms of control. Just as the things in the image are *mise en scène*, the framework of the image is motivated by motifs that are not visible in the image and do not cite other images and texts, motifs that must be ascribed to *container drivers*—whether they are called Marx, Muir, or Beninng—when one unpacks their narratives and retells them in one's own words. They could be narratives about manual labor and the laborious task of finding space and time for reading one's own life stories in a world, one might add rather nostalgically, of readers and viewers—and container drivers[32]—left without their own time to perceive the ever-changing landscape.

Translated by Allison Plath-Moseley

32) Recommended listening: The Fall, "Container Drivers," released on the album *Grotesques (After the Gramme)* in 1980. This essay, as it appears in a shortened version, is dedicated to Merlene and Richard Samuelian in Fresno/California. Thanks to Fredric Jameson for insightful comments.

El Valley Centro (1999)

Los (2000, top),
Sogobi (2001)

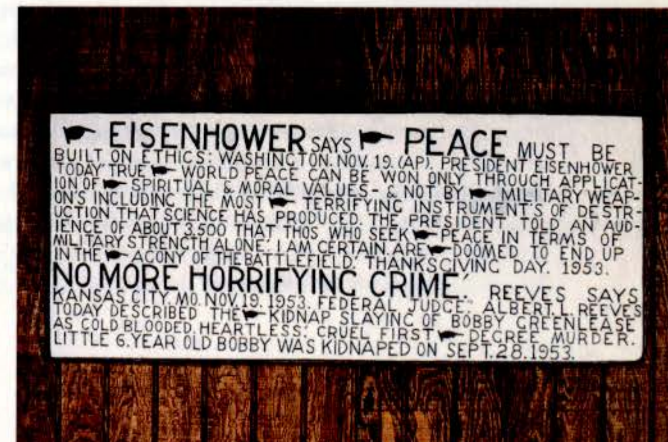
13 *LAKES* (2004, top),
TEN SKIES (2004)

27 *Years Later* (2004)

casting a glance (2007)

RR (2007)

James Benning, map of the US (1999/2004)



James Benning's copies, made in 2003,
of paintings by (from top to bottom):
Howard Finster, *Sea Will Give Up Its Dead*
Gertrude Morgan, *There Is An Eye Watching You*
Jesse Howard, *Untitled*

Scott MacDonald

James Benning's *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*, and the Culture of Distraction

James Benning's long career as a 16mm filmmaker has grown dense with paradox. He remains best-known, at least in the United States, for his earliest longer films: *11 × 14* (1976) and *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), extended riffs on the American Midwestern cityscape and landscape (during the mid-1970s, Benning's films were seen as a breakthrough contribution to American avant-garde cinema from what some have called the cultural "fly-over zone": the territory between the centers of film production in New York and San Francisco/Los Angeles). And yet, the most productive and accomplished moment of his career began decades later, once many American avant-garde programmers seemed to have lost interest in him, with *North on Evers* (1991), the first film he made once he had moved to California to teach at the California Institute of the Arts, and has continued through *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*, both completed in 2004. Second, Benning is best known in Europe, especially in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, where his films are seen not only in theaters, but on television. He himself is a reasonably international person—he has appeared at film festivals around the world and is a regular at the Rotterdam and Berlin Film Festivals; he has taught in Korea and in Mexico. Yet, in all these years, Benning has rigorously confined his filmmaking to the United States, and with the exception of a single shot of Alaska's Lake Iliamna in *13 LAKES*, to the continental United States. Indeed, *The United States of America* (1975, co-made with Bette Gordon) and *UTOPIA* (1998) are the only films that have taken Benning outside the United States, and then, only briefly, to contemplate Niagara Falls from the Canadian side and the US/Mexican border from the Mexican side, respectively. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, to all appearances Benning is a thoroughly secular, relatively political person who, however, makes films that, increasingly, model a contemplative, meditative, even a spiritual sensibility.

Benning's 'California Trilogy'—*El Valley Centro* (1999), *Los* (2000) and *Sogobi* (2001)—and *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* represent an epitome, a quintessence, of his career; and they may signal a kind of conclusion: recently, Benning claimed that "When I finish *casting a glance*, which is supposed to show at Documenta this summer, I plan to buy a DVD camera and start a new career. No more 16mm filmmaking: the lab work is too stressful, and projection is getting worse than terrible. I'm going to make small DVD works and only show them to friends (...)."[1] Whether Benning lives up to this claim—and if he does, whether his digital work will in fact represent a new direction—remains to be seen. But there are good reasons to look carefully at *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* as capstone works in a long, distinguished career.

[1]) Email to the author 4/4/07.

During the years since his breakthrough films, *8½ × 11* (1974) and *11 × 14*, Benning's work has been characterized by a progressive renunciation of the conventions and distractions of commercial media. Indeed, the move from *11 × 14* to *One Way Boogie Woogie* can be read as a premonition of this process. *11 × 14* is a feature film that develops several skeletal narratives: early in the film, for example, we see a man and a woman in what appears to be a clandestine meeting on the street; these characters kiss, then separate and while we see each of them later in the film, their paths never again cross. Benning evokes narrative cinema, and in particular the classic tradition of narrative intercutting between plotlines that converge at the film's conclusion, only to defy the expectations it has traditionally created. In *One Way Boogie Woogie*, however, what few shards of character and plot are evident are subsumed within a rigorously organized, serial structure. *One Way Boogie Woogie* is made up of sixty one-minute shots; the focus throughout is on the filmmaker's *arrangement* of what we see, not on any development of plot or character. Both films are full of formal experiment, but the absence of anything like an ongoing narrative in *One Way Boogie Woogie* represents a decrease in the number of elements explored.

During the decades that followed *11 × 14* and *One Way Boogie Woogie*, Benning explored a range of combinations of narrative development and rigorous formal structure, all of which defy the expectations created by commercial cinema. Some of the resulting films seem to emphasize formal arrangements of space and time, and of sound and image, more than narrative (*Grand Opera* [1979], for instance); some seem to emphasize narrative more than formal organization (*Him and Me* [1981], for example). In general, however, Benning maintained a relatively even balance, at least through the 1980s: *American Dreams* (1984) and *Landscape Suicide* (1986) are particularly good examples. Since *North on Evers*, however, the films have moved more and more clearly in the direction of formal organization. Both *Deseret* (1995) and *Four Corners* (1997) do include sets of mini-narratives, presented as visual texts and/or as voice-off narrations within a larger set of formal developments; but after *UTOPIA* for which Benning 'borrowed' the exciting story of Che Guevara's years in Bolivia from Richard Dindo's 1997 documentary *Ernesto Che Guevara, The Bolivian Diary* (Benning used the

Dindo soundtrack, complete, as a score against which to present his imagery of the Southern Californian and Northern Mexican landscape), his films have nearly done away with narrative—or at least they have relocated narrative from on-screen into the theater itself, where the spectator's adventure in coming to terms with Benning's sense of space and especially his sense of time tends to become the primary experience generated by his films.

Probably no filmmaker has been more involved with exploring and documenting the American landscape and cityscape than Benning. Place has nearly always been a central concern in his films (there are exceptions, including *American Dreams*—though even here, the textually presented narrative of Arthur Bremer traveling around the United States and into Canada in the hope of assassinating a presidential candidate evokes a variety of locales); and in recent years, the progressive renunciation I have mentioned seems to have been in the service of positioning place ever more fully in the foreground of our attention. For example, both *Deseret* and *Four Corners*, as their titles suggest, are experimental documentaries about particular places and the history that has evolved within them. *Deseret* focuses on the history of what came to be called Utah ("Deseret" was the original Mormon name for the territory) after the Mormons settled there. *Four Corners* focuses on that convergence of political boundaries where Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona meet, a geography where the histories of a range of native and immigrant populations have been entangled for centuries.

In Benning's 'California Trilogy' and in *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* the history of events that have occurred within the particular places represented in the films has become at best implicit; these more recent films are less experimental documentaries *about* the geography and history of particular locations than they are cinematic experiences of being '*in*' particular places for extended cinematic durations. In public discussions of the recent films, Benning often expresses the hope that, because of the length of his shots, the audience will sometimes become conscious of a different kind of history: the series of personal adventures that resulted in the shots they are seeing. Obvious instances where this does happen include a shot in *Sogobi* and another in *13 LAKES* (at Lake Iliamna), where a wind blowing from behind the camera—the one in the heat of Death Valley, the other in cold Alaskan weather—is so strong that we cannot but wonder at Benning seeking out such conditions for these shots, and be aware of

the discomfort he must have been feeling during the filming. In most cases, however, our consciousness of Benning, and whatever 'narratives' he lived during the shooting, is marginal at best. (This awareness of Benning-as-filmmaker *has* produced a film about Benning at work: Reinhard Wulf's *James Benning. Circling the Image* [2003], which chronicles Benning on the road shooting images for *13 LAKES*.)

The increasing focus in Benning's films on placing the viewer within extended moments in particular locales is confirmed by a change in the nature of Benning's self-reflexivity in recent films. In early works like *11 × 14* and *One Way Boogie Woogie*, the American Midwest was a setting where Benning could play with the possibilities of image and sound. A particular shot in *11 × 14* might have us looking at a cornfield being plowed by a tractor; the middle furrows of the field extend into the distance from the bottom center of the frame and furrows flare out to the left and right of this center point. The energy of the shot results from the fact that the tractor moves from the background toward the right foreground and then leaves the image on screen right; after a moment, it moves across the screen in the very near foreground and off screen again to the left, then moves back into the image from screen left and continues into the distance: that is, the unusual visual organization of the shot and its use of off screen space becomes as 'visible' as the subject of the shot, a tractor plowing a field. Similarly, in *One Way Boogie Woogie* we hear the off screen sound of a train that we assume is approaching, as a woman is unraveling red string while walking backwards across a train track; but the train never appears, and the surprise to our expectation becomes the subject of the shot. In these early films, Benning seemed to be demonstrating not only that the Midwest was a visually interesting location for American independent films, but that the Midwest—despite all the attention being accorded New York and San Francisco—was part of the cinematic avant-garde and its exploration of fundamental cinematic elements. In the 'California Trilogy', however, and in *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*, one no longer feels that Benning is providing self-reflexive, wryly amusing formal 'games' for the viewer. Rather, the focus in the new films is on engaging the spectator's perceptiveness. We are less involved with Benning's formal wit, than with confronting the challenge of discovering the subtleties of image and sound within unusually extended durations.

The rigor of the structure of the 'California Trilogy'—each of the three films is made up of thirty-five two-and-a-half-minute shots—seems

a premonition of the even more minimal structures of *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*, which are made up of thirteen and ten ten-minute shots, respectively. However, the Trilogy includes elements of structure that Benning renounces in *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*. The Trilogy is held together formally by the identical structures of the three films, and by the fact that particular kinds of images appear in each of the films: "[T]here are so many cross-references (…) Even the first time through, you might notice that there are cows in all three films, and billboards—you might even remember that they're all from the same company, Outdoor Systems—and aircraft, and trains (a freight train, a commuter train, then a freight train again), and oceangoing ships (…)."[2]

The Trilogy is also held together by the implicit politic that informs all three films. Benning: "The whole trilogy is basically about the politics of water. In the Central Valley, corporate farms take advantage of two irrigation systems that were built with public money, one with federal money, one with state money. The corporations paid for none of the construction, but they take full advantage of it: 85 percent of the water in California is used for farming; only 15 percent is used for manufacturing and public consumption. And, of course, Los Angeles was expanded by stealing water from the Owens Valley. When I made *El Valley Centro*, I was very aware of the water politics, and I thought, 'Well, when I make this urban companion, I'll have to make a reference to how those politics continue from one place to another'. So *Los* begins with water flowing into LA in the original aqueduct from the Owens Valley. And then in *Sogobi*, I tried to show where the water comes from (…). The very last image explains the mystery of the first. Also, the last image of *El Valley Centro* relates to the first image of *Los*; and the last image of *Los* relates to the first image of *Sogobi*. The Trilogy could play continuously, and you could enter anywhere."[3]

In other words, while narrative is no longer evident in the 'California Trilogy', and while place has moved into the foreground, the politics of place, as these politics have played out in California (and, of course, across the entire American Southwest) in recent decades, informs the structuring of the Trilogy.

In *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* even such implicit politics are generally no longer in evidence, and whatever political edge the two films have is a function less of the images we see than

2) Benning quoted in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5. Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 251.

3) Ibid., p. 250.

of the ways in which we come to grips with the extended temporal durations of the shots, durations unusual even for Benning. Like many independent filmmakers working in the wake of Andy Warhol's long, slow films of 1963–1964, Benning has never been a stranger to extended shots. The fourth shot of *11 × 14* presents a ride on a Chicago El train; the ride and the shot last for 10 minutes 50 seconds. Later in that film, a beautiful and troubling shot of a smokestack sending billows of white smoke into the atmosphere lasts more than seven minutes. Also, like so many of his early 1970s colleagues, Benning produced a single-shot film, or at least the illusion of one: *9-1-75* (1975), during which, for twenty-two minutes, Benning's camera tracks through a crowded campsite at Mauthe Lake, north of Milwaukee, on Labor Day.[4] And more recently, *Four Corners* includes a set of four extended shots of individual works of art. However, the shots in both *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*, all of which last exactly ten minutes, are different from Benning's earlier extended shots in the subtlety of the action evident during these long durations: and they are different even from the extended shots in *Four Corners*, in which nothing moves at all, since each of those shots is combined with the sound of a narrator reading a text that traces the evolution of a complex and troubling aspect of American history. Further, while all the extended shots in Benning's longer films before *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* are contextualized by other, less temporally challenging elements (this isn't true of the 'California Trilogy' films, though the shot-lengths are not as extreme as those in *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*), these recent films present a series of such challenges *in a continuous, unrelieved sequence*. Benning's separation of each of the shots from the next by a moment of darkness (a bit over eight seconds long) further retards the velocity of both films.

The resulting experiences of *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* are, of course, highly unusual in a variety of ways. In fact, for first-time viewers the films tend to require, early on, some decision-making. During my first experience of each film—and I am sure my experience is relatively usual—the relentlessness of Benning's durational strategy seemed a bit frightening, in a manner that reminds me of my experience of many horror films. In a horror film that gives every evidence of being truly scary, viewers must, at some point early in the screening, make a decision to endure whatever the film is about to send their way. They know, of course,

4) Some years ago, I surveyed the genre of the single-shot film in "Putting All Your Eggs in One Basket," see *Afterimage*, vol. 16, no. 8 (March 1989), pp. 10–16.

that they can leave the theater at any time, but even so, the decision to allow oneself to *be* frightened must be made and accepted. Much the same kind of decision is required by both *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*. By the second or third shot of either film, it has become clear (even if it is not already clear from prior publicity about the screening) that the film will be an extended sequence of ten-minute durations, and further, that these moments will be, at least compared to nearly all moving-image experiences in film and on television (even to nearly all avant-garde experiences in film and on video), unusually minimal: almost nothing will be happening. Once this realization has come, viewers must decide either to leave the theater or accede to Benning's durational challenge. The fact that, at least in my experience, nearly all of those who come to see *13 LAKES* (I have not programmed *TEN SKIES*) do stay for the entire experience represents something of a victory for Benning's artistry, and demonstrates that, though Benning has refused to provide many of the elements most people go to the movies for, what he *has* provided has been not only endurable, but engaging enough to sustain a 130-minute experience.

What exactly is it that *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* offer spectators? The most obvious answer is that the films provide a kind of visual and auditory retraining, a retraining related, at least in a general sense, to Stan Brakhage's quest to use the 16mm movie camera as a tool for creating metaphors for the kinds of open perception that he imagined very young children to have during those visually Edenic months before their acculturation into language results in the atrophy of perception. Like Brakhage, Benning means to offer opportunities for the perceptual transformation of acculturated adults, though his strategy for achieving this is quite different from Brakhage's. While many of Brakhage's films mimic the experience of freeform, first-person sight by means of gestural camera movements and dense montage, *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* open up visual and auditory spaces by using a tripod-mounted camera within long unedited shots. Filmmaker Peter Hutton, a Benning friend for many years, in describing his own work, has provided a useful way of thinking about Benning's approach: "The experience of my films is a little like daydreaming. It's about taking the time to just sit down and look at things, which I don't think is a very Western preoccupation. A lot of influences on me when I was younger were more Eastern. They suggested a contemplative way of looking—whether at painting, sculpture, architecture, or just a landscape—where the more time you

spend actually looking at things, the more they reveal themselves in ways that you don't expect.

For the most part, people don't allow themselves the time or the circumstances to get into a relationship with the world that provides freedom to actually look at things. There's always an overriding design or mission behind their negotiation with life. I think when you have the occasion to step away from agendas—whether it's through circumstance or out of some kind of emotional necessity—then you're often struck by the incredible epiphanies of nature. These are often very subtle things, right at the edge of most people's sensibilities."[5]

Of course, Hutton's films are silent, but in *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* Benning works with both sound and image in a manner analogous to what Hutton says. During any particular ten-minute shot in either *13 LAKES* or *TEN SKIES*, spectators are first confronted with a recognizable image—a lake, a skyscape—that is changing, usually quite gradually. Indeed, in some instances the changes taking place are so gradual that we cannot quite see them occurring. Particular shots in both films remind me of Morgan Fisher's *Phi Phenomenon* (1968), during which viewers watch an institutional clock without a second hand for nearly eleven minutes: minute by minute, we can see that the hands of the clock *have moved*, but we cannot see the actual movement. Fisher's film wittily directs our attention to a fundamental dimension of cinema (the phi phenomenon is that function of the brain that causes a sequence of still images presented to the eye/mind in rapid succession to seem to be in motion) that, in *his* film, we are not quite experiencing! During *Phi Phenomenon* there is a tendency to focus on the clock's minute hand in an attempt to perceive the motion we know is occurring, and much the same happens during some of the shots in *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*: we recognize that these are images from the real world and that therefore they *must be* changing. In time, we are able to recognize that one or another kind of movement has occurred in even the most still shot of a lake or of a sky.

Basically, there are two kinds of change that occur during any particular ten-minute moment in *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*: the transformations evident in each individual shot and the differences evident in the change from one shot to the next. In *13 LAKES* Benning's compositional decisions help to place both kinds of change into clear relief. Each of the thirteen shots of American lakes is organized so that the

5) Hutton quoted in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 243–244.

line created by the surface of the lake crosses the image horizontally, approximately half way from the top to the bottom of the frame. Along with the rectangle of the frame itself, this creates a skeletal grid that helps us measure the movements within individual shots, as well as the differences from lake to lake.

Within each individual shot in *13 LAKES* a range of changes occur. In the first shot, of Jackson Lake in Wyoming, we look across the lake at the Grand Teton Mountains, early in the morning, as the alpenglow gradually alters the color of the mountains and the colors of the reflections in the lake. In the fifth shot, made at Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin, the frame is divided between the blue-white surface of the lake and a light blue sky; very little visual change is evident—the shading varies slightly; tiny, very distant white lights, apparently from a small pleasure boat, hover just at the edge of visibility— but the auditory surround of a chorus of frogs varies continually. And in the ninth shot, made at the Great Salt Lake in Utah, a rather surreal landscape reminiscent of certain Jerry Uelsmann photographs reveals slight visual changes—the movement of the water varies, birds fly through the frame in various directions—*and* auditory changes: in addition to the regular lapping of the water, we hear the chirping of crickets and, periodically, the sound of a distant car or a plane. Each of the individual shots in *13 LAKES* offers, as Brakhage would put it, "an adventure of perception" during which spectators are challenged to consciously engage the changes, or lack of changes, occurring at any particular moment in the scene before them—a most unusual position for spectators of moving-image media, given the usual hyper-manipulations of space and time in commercial film and television.

The skeletal grid provided by the film frame and the horizontal line of each lake's surface also acts as a ground against which we can measure the successive figures of the different lakes, the way Eadweard Muybridge's linear grids were meant to foreground differences in successive stages of animal and human locomotion. The sequence of lakes in *13 LAKES* is geographically random: we see Jackson Lake, Wyoming; Moosehead Lake, Maine; the Salton Sea in southern California; Lake Superior in Wisconsin; Lake Winnebago, Wisconsin; Lake Okeechobee, Florida; Lower Red Lake, Minnesota; Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana; the Great Salt Lake, Utah; Lake Iliamna, Alaska; Lake Powell, Arizona/Utah; Crater Lake, Oregon; and Oneida Lake, New York. The choice and order of this particular set of lakes seem to have something to


13 LAKES (2004, left), *TEN SKIES* (2004)

do with the considerable differences between them—the move from Jackson Lake to Moosehead Lake to the Salton Sea at the beginning of the film, for example, jumps the viewer from one geographic region to another, from one kind of terrain to another, and from one kind of lake to another (Jackson Lake and Moosehead Lake were created by geological forces; the Salton Sea first by a faulty irrigation system and subsequently by irrigation run-off from the Imperial Valley in Southern California). Benning's choice of lakes also seems to be related to his personal history, at least to the degree that some lakes seem chosen in part because of Benning's psychic investment in certain geographic regions: his Milwaukee origins are evident in the fact that three of the thirteen of the lakes are in the upper Midwest; his choice of Oneida Lake in New York State may have something to do with his frequent visits with close friends in this area; and for years he has been regularly drawn to both the Salton Sea and to the Great Salt Lake (the Great Salt Lake, especially Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* [1970], is an important location in *North on Evers* and *Deseret*, as well as in *13 LAKES*, and it is the subject of *casting a glance* [2007]). But the most important principle at work in the choice and arrangement of the thirteen lakes seems to be the creation of a certain variety in the kinds of perceptual experiences Benning can provide in these different locales, perceptual experiences that to some extent echo each other, while also revealing a subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, range of distinctions. Indeed, during the opening minutes of some shots, viewers may find themselves wondering how the shot *is* a useful addition to what has been experienced so far, only to realize, slowly but surely, that the new shot does in fact add to what has gone before.

Generally speaking, the experience of *TEN SKIES* echoes the experience of *13 LAKES*. We are engaged by movements of more or less subtlety within each image, and often what we see is qualified by an off screen sound-scape. Further, the movement from one shot to the next inevitably provides both surprise and continuity. In the opening shot of *TEN SKIES* the changes in the sky are barely perceptible; we can see subtle variations in color as two jet trails move more or less vertically up through the frame and as a subtle glow across the bottom of the image forms during the second half of the shot. While the first shot could hardly be more low-key (a way of warning viewers that this film will test their patience), the second shot is quite dramatic: a glowing gold cloudscape or, really, smokescape—Benning filmed the smoke from a

brushfire that raged across the mountains north of Los Angeles in 2003—moves rightward, accompanied by the sound of helicopters and planes. The shot is gorgeous and, once one realizes its source, a bit frightening. From shot to shot, the balance of visual versus auditory experience varies continually. The fourth shot includes a relatively straightforward skyscape (white clouds moving slowly to the right across a bright blue sky) accompanied by a particularly complex soundtrack: at various distances we hear the sounds of birds, a plane, a dog barking, distant traffic, the talking and singing (in Spanish) of some men at work, an idling motor—many sounds, some of which are quite clear, while others remain ambiguous. The following shot reveals the sun, barely visible through a mottled, gray-green sky; the sound is less complex than the sound in shot four (we do hear the cooing of doves, a dog barking, and some insect sounds), but there are several layers of motion: the clouds move to the left, causing the sun to seem to be moving to the right; during the final third of the shot, a plane moves vertically up through the image relatively quickly; and during the ten minutes of shooting the position of the sun changes from about forty percent of the way from the left side of the frame to the dead center of the frame.

One difference between *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* involves the points of view of Benning's compositions. *13 LAKES* assumes a conventional pictorial horizontality: in every case we are looking across a lake that is framed in an identical fashion to all the other lakes. In *TEN SKIES*, however, the angle of our gaze varies from shot to shot. In some shots we look at cloudscapes that seem just above the horizon. In the fifth shot, however, we realize—when the plane flies through the image—that we must be looking much more directly up. Further, in *TEN SKIES* the skyscapes often tend toward the abstract, and at times evoke the work of particular abstract painters: the first shot, for example, reminds me of color field painting and, in particular, of Jules Olitski; the dramatic second shot, of J. M. W. Turner. A difference that is not evident during the film, but is made clear in the final credits is that while *13 LAKES* was filmed in a wide variety of locations, some of them relatively difficult to get to, *TEN SKIES* was "Filmed in Val Verde, California," where Benning lives—though, obviously, other than the second shot, these skies could have been filmed in many places (in an unpublished interview, 4/15/07, Benning indicated to me that by "Filmed in Val Verde" he means in the general geographic region he thinks of as his "backyard," which

includes Death Valley and the Sequoia Natural Forest in the Sierra Nevada mountains). A third important distinction between the two films is that, according to Benning (unpublished interview), in *13 LAKES* sound was recorded in sync with the visuals (and later, modified during the editing process), while all the sound in *TEN SKIES* was borrowed from tapes recorded for other Benning films and combined with the new imagery. This difference in the histories of the sound tracks for the two films is subtly signaled by Benning's use of the same sound of distant gunshots in the Crater Lake shot (the twelfth) of *13 LAKES* and in the eighth shot of *TEN SKIES*.

More fully than earlier Benning films, *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* represent something of a perceptual quest, most obviously for viewers, but also for those who decide to present either film to an audience. The rigor of Benning's design for each film—the minimal compositions of individual shots; the slow, regular rhythm of the editing—not only moves the differences from shot to shot into the foreground of the attention of those who engage the film, it foregrounds the cinematic apparatus itself. To this point in his career, Benning has been consistent in championing 16mm production and exhibition. Of course, one of the inevitable dimensions of all film exhibition is the fact that over time, projection destroys prints, through friction and through the exposure of the photographic image to light and air. 16mm is particularly prone to damage since, for many years, it has been the film gauge most often used in schools, colleges, and universities, where professional projectionists are not used and where projection equipment is not always first-rate. The projection of 16mm films often results in scratches inscribed on the filmstrip, and it is not unusual for dust and other detritus to find its way into projectors during screenings. In most films, such interference is not particularly visible, or at least is easy to ignore, because of the amount and kinds of movement in the imagery. But in films in which the movement of the imagery is as subtle as it is in *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*, any damage to the filmstrip, any dirt in the projector is immediately obvious; indeed, it can quickly become the *most* obvious dimension of an image. Periodically, we must wrestle our attention away from this annoying scratch in the emulsion or that hair fluttering at the edge of the frame, and back to Benning's imagery and sound.

I see this virtually inevitable aspect of the experience of these two Benning films as the material analog of viewers' struggles to remain focused and alert during screenings. Again and again during a viewing of either film, we

'awake' to realize that our minds have moved elsewhere, into daydream, memory, worry, planning … and we wrestle our consciousness back to the screen and the soundtrack, often to realize that in the interim things have altered more than we might have expected. An undistracted viewing of either *13 LAKES* or *TEN SKIES* is well-nigh impossible. What Benning has done, however, is to make imaginable the *idea* of utter clarity and thorough awareness. He has implicitly provided a goal, a cinematic ideal, that feels worth striving for, and this cinematic ideal functions as a metaphor for one of the essential quests of life: our desire to make the most of the perceptual opportunities provided by the moment to moment incarnation of the sensory and sensual world around us in the face of our inevitable decay and mortality.

13 LAKES and *TEN SKIES* can function as a form of therapy, as a way of helping us learn to make space for careful perception and for sustained contemplation: that is, as a form of resistance to the relentless distraction around us, distraction that in modern culture is emblemized by the movies and television. The culture of distraction within which we function seems predicated on the idea that a better life is essentially a deeper commitment to our material well-being, and in particular, to an ever-expanding level of consumption—of material possessions, of food, of shots per minute (…). Of course, *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* are, like other films, consumer objects that require the exploitation and consumption of material resources. Benning has always admitted that by being a filmmaker, "I'm demanding a service that's polluting the Earth. Filmmaking isn't a clean industry;"[6] and when he is present at screenings of his work, he reminds audiences that many of his films require considerable travel: for example, he claims to have driven ten thousand miles to make the recent *RR* (2007), and *13 LAKES* required considerable driving, as well as a flight to Alaska.

That Benning's recent films confront the idea of conspicuous consumption in a variety of ways, even as they take part in industrial processes that pollute the environment, is a contradiction that these films share with all other films that mean to promote an environmental consciousness. Nevertheless, *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* effectively model the idea that we can do more than simply consume, that we can learn to see and hear more clearly and more completely, and that enriching our lives is not simply a matter of consuming more, but rather involves re-energizing our attention and our perceptual capacities so that our experiences of the moments we have in this world are more complete. Like other forms of perceptual and spiritual training—transcendental meditation and yoga, for example—the experiences of *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* create a sense that being in the world involves a striving for something beyond immediate comfort and material well-being: a psychic clarity and patience that, for lack of a better term, I'll call spiritual health.

The increasingly global sweep of the culture of distraction and hysterical consumption promoted by international corporate capitalism seems to be producing a variety of closely related forms of cinematic 'resistance', both in the US and abroad. Peter Hutton's work has always shared a great deal with Benning's, and such recent films as *Time and Tide* (2000, 35 minutes), *Skagafjordur* (2004, 33 minutes), and *At Sea* (2007, 60 minutes) have asked viewers for more extended perceptual concentration than Hutton's earlier films. Sharon Lockhart's recent *Pine Flat* (2006) presents twelve ten-minute shots focusing on children living in Pine Flat, a tiny town in the mountains north of Los Angeles. The shots are composed in a manner that sometimes evokes Benning, and the resulting film provides many of the same challenges for viewers as *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* (Benning is listed as an advisor for *Pine Flat*, though Benning is quick to point out that Lockhart used the ten-minute shot before he did, in her *Goshogaoka* [1997], and that she has influenced him at least as much as he has influenced her). *Five* (2007), a digital video by Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami is made up of what appear to be five continuous shots made near the Caspian Sea; the fifth is a minimal, thirty-two-minute 'shot' (it looks like a single shot, but is made up of several) of the surface of a lake at night, as clouds and then a rainstorm obscure and reveal the moon and its reflection. The shot is accompanied by a complex, gradually evolving soundtrack during which frogs, insects, and other wildlife seem to respond to the changes in light and weather, and at the end to the arrival of dawn. The fifth shot in *Five* asks precisely the kind of patience and attention that Benning's shots in *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES* require. I see all these films/videos—and there are other, closely related works—as a form of resistance to the co-option of consciousness by a global consumer society, as a way of arguing, insofar as possible from within 'the belly of the beast', that technologies that have been in the service of unbridled corporate capitalism for decades can still be re-directed in the interests of the environmental, psychic and spiritual health of modern societies.

6) MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5*, p. 239.

Michael Pisaro

James Benning, musician

Long shots, one following another until you begin to lose count.
Chains of moving images, but the camera doesn't move. Imperceptible change.
Gun shots, trains rolling over tracks, people talking and singing—wind, water, cars, helicopters, birds, radios.
Green, yellow, grey, aquamarine, brown, blue, pink—skies, roads, lakes, dirt, trees, the horizon.
Every point in the field is a point of potential in the rectangle of light.
Çe qui passe*: what happens is what is recorded.*
Where change (over) fixed duration (equals) a temporal plane.
Flows and interruptions: the cuts, the time between, the layering of shots, evolving patterns of light, color and sound.
A work of preservation and a challenge to vision and visual memory.
A composition of definite stillness.

The films James Benning has made over the last fifteen years, beginning with *North on Evers* (1991) and continuing on through a series that includes *Deseret* (1995), *Four Corners* (1997), *El Valley Centro* (1999), *Los* (2000), *Sogobi* (2001), *13 LAKES* (2004), *TEN SKIES* (2004) and most recently *RR* (2007), are a bounty to an attentive musician.[1] The aesthetic undercurrents in this series of films are at times so close to things which have happened in recent music that they appear to touch, even to overlap. In what follows I would like to discuss a few of these areas of mutual interest. Those who have encountered the musical work of John Cage and Alvin Lucier, of James Tenney and Christian Wolff, of Peter Ablinger, Max Neuhaus, Antoine Beuger and many others in this musical stream,[2] can see how many of their concerns are mirrored in the work of Benning.

1) This might also be true for many of the preceding works, but, as will become clear, there are many ways in which the concerns and techniques of this more recent group are especially close to the concerns of experimental music. Certainly one could find very interesting relationships between (and uses of) sound, music and image in *The United States of America* (1975), *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977) and especially *American Dreams* (1984).

2) I am referring here to the experimental music tradition, which, although it has a kind of pre-history in the music of Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Henry Cowell, Edgard Varèse and others, begins in earnest in the middle of the 20th century with the music of John Cage (1912–1992). It continues to be a lively source of musical innovation that has extended, over the last few decades, far beyond its American origins. Those interested in the beginnings of this music might consult a somewhat outdated, but still very clear and useful source of information: Michael Nyman's book *Experimental Music: Cage and beyond* (Schirmer: New York, 1974). A list of some of the central concerns of this music that are shared with experimental film should at least include: explorations of the limits of perception, structural use of duration, chance procedures, new work made from the materials of earlier work, and investigations of the possibilities in the fundamental materials of the medium.

Composition

To begin I would like to propose that Benning, along with being a great filmmaker, be considered as a significant and innovative *composer*. While I am fairly sure that James does not think of himself as one, from this composer's perspective, I have come to recognize a colleague.

Benning's films are assemblages of images and sounds. Perhaps any film could be described this way. However, with Benning the fundamental nature of the work *as assemblage* is much more clear than it normally is, due, in part, to the absence of anything like a conventional narrative (and the cinematic formulas that come along with this). Interestingly, the strong conceptual and formal unity of the films does not overwhelm our ability to consider and to follow the trajectory of the individual parts. Thus sound seems so much more present, so much more itself than in the work of most other filmmakers.

The relationship between what you hear and what you see in a recent Benning film is tricky. Sometimes (rarely) the sound has been recorded simultaneously with the image. Sometimes the sounds have been recorded in the same location as the visual image, but at a different time. Often sounds are changed, added, subtracted or simply placed onto the sound track. Conventional music (mostly songs of various kinds and genres) is reserved for that 'ambient' music that might occur in the outdoor environment of the shot, or title music for opening or closing credits. There is so much sound in a Benning film, so many kinds of noise that they become as differentiated as kinds of light, colors of the sky. Loud and soft noises, variations of the frequency spectrum, the presence or absence of pitch, the natural rhythms of the recorded sound in an environment, the flow of sound over the duration of the shot: the sequencing of all of this in a linear fashion makes a beautiful kind of music. Indeed, it is a kind of music that only a few musicians might have dared to make. Benning's soundtracks could play as pieces unto themselves.

The sounds are of course combined with what happens on the screen, but also tangential to it. If the visual continuum contains a vanishing point (the horizon) *behind* the screen, the aural continuum moves in the other direction, towards you as you watch, then behind you. It makes you aware of the space you are in while you watch the film: its (aural) contours are hinged to the visual contours of the screen. I am never more conscious of these two spaces

TEN SKIES (2004, top),
13 LAKES (2004)

than when I'm watching one of these films.

In the films the affective areas of sight and sound usually overlap, but they do not always correspond. One could *listen* to a Benning film and not fully anticipate what one would see (and *vice versa*). This feature opens an area of *play* between vision and hearing so complex that it can only be provisionally networked during a viewing: so rich that it leaves a trace instead of a memory.

The Frame and the Field

The entire space, any region within the rectangular frame of a Benning film, is potentially active. Nature (or life) happens everywhere. At any moment a plane can fly across the sky or a leaf can turn in the wind. Clouds, dust, vehicles; ripples on water; mist, snow; the effects of light and color (brightness, reflection and refraction, changes of hue); any one of these things can move or change in any part of a filmed landscape. Even on quiet days there is an undercurrent of activity.

When you make a field recording of a certain location, you notice after awhile that in the outdoors you are always recording everything. Once I went to Chinatown in Los Angeles to record a fountain that I had found particularly beautiful. I made the recording, fully convinced that I had primarily heard the fountain. After listening to and working with the recording I began to lose this orientation. I was hearing footsteps everywhere, moving in many directions. There were autos and buses (and especially bus brakes). Helicopters. Then I began to focus on the human voices, mostly conversing in Chinese —several conversations going on simultaneously, interspersed with what I recognized as laughter, gossip, outrage, companionship and so on. In the distance there was a freeway, and then

a thousand other things I could not quite make out, but which left their traces as sonic dust. We live in a world in which layers upon layers of things happen. (Worlds on top of worlds, worlds inside of worlds.) We know this, but we are seldom made conscious of it. We need the discipline of the recording device, of the frame, and especially of the person recording, to make us reinvestigate what we are living in and through.

For me, the regions of Benning's screen function something like the frequency spectrum. In noise, nearly all audible frequency ranges are present all the time. What allows us to distinguish one thing from another is the emphasis or harmonic coloring one set of frequencies receives. Benning's screen is filled. He might at times be framing an image; a billboard, a train, a lake, a mountain—but he makes you feel that everything around the image is just as important as the image itself. In his most recent works (especially *13 LAKES*, *TEN SKIES* and *RR*) he chooses central images that are always undergoing constant change. In *TEN SKIES* we repeatedly observe the phenomenon of a drifting cloud. It moves, seemingly, in all directions at once. You don't want to blink because you fear you might miss some subtle transformation of a particular region. Over a period of five minutes the cloud will have changed completely in most of its particulars, but you'll be convinced that you are somehow looking at the same image, at a very particular cloud on a quite specific day. Any point on the vertical-horizontal field can flare up or darken, can become more or less visible.

Or *you* can change. You might suddenly find an area of fascinating activity where you saw nothing before. Some images appear at first completely still, as still as a still life; but then you become aware of very small shifts and flows, of a momentary radiance.[3] Your eyes become sharper, more active, more sensitive, and develop a desire to see more. "Fields have eyes."[4]

The frame is the thing that stays fixed, and by so doing gives you four lines with which to measure everything that happens. The frame changes everything—it formalizes things that are usually considered to have no form. It makes clear that the changes in size (such as the odd trapezoidal shapes of moving train cars) are due to proximity (to perspective). Depending on

3) Here I think especially of the shot of Lake Winnebago from *13 LAKES*. In this shot we have a view of exceptional stillness. It is a bright, stable image of water and sky. Yellows and blues and whites refract in a way that creates a luminous haze. It seems that nothing moves. Perhaps the water conveys just the slightest sense of surface variation. Then, with no apparent change to the image, it seems that everything is moving, microscopically: the picture is alive.

4) Proverb of unknown origin: "Fields have eyes, woods have ears."

how you look at the image, this can seem natural or surreal: but it always feels *composed*. I think the frame in a Benning film works in the way that *harmony* (however defined) does in a musical composition: it gives a "frame of reference" (or a set of proportional relationships) to the things between the edges.

Duration. A particular stillness

In a Benning film an image is made to *last*. Moving at the normal rate of 24 frames per second, the individual image is trying to sustain itself, to prolong its existence by adding one tiny increment after another. This can be viewed as being a very fast rate, since it so effectively convinces us of continuous motion; or it can be viewed as a very slow rate, because of everything it leaves out between the frames.[5] Each image that successfully preserves a large part of the previous one is a small triumph for the perpetuation of image's identity. There is nonetheless also a *gap* between every photo-image, every frame— something we fill in automatically, but which is nonetheless a realm of infinite (and infinitely small) event. This fact affects our subjective ideas about what moves and what doesn't, about *how* things move, *how fast* they move, and *what* is moving,[6] and I think the ontological nature of this question lurks behind any viewing of a Benning film.

If we are directed to a particular movement (say, of an actor *doing something* or a shot whose function is to move some aspect of the plot forward), our natural focus is on the clear subject of the shot. We want to believe in the continuity of the act, because we believe in the character or in the plot.[7] When a central figure or subject is missing, *everything* seems to move, to continue.[8]

5) There is a fundamental issue of continuity for all of the time-based arts. For a musician who occasionally works in digital media, the difference between film's rate of 24 frames per second and, say, the 96,000 per second sampling rate of a modern digital sound recording seems numerically staggering. This numerical difference however I think says more about what happens with vision and sound (and the difference between the eye and the ear) than it does about the quality of the representation. "Woods have ears."

6) To quote from the famous Zen koan: "Not the wind, not the flag, *mind* is moving."

7) In Benning's work some things may appear to move more than others, but even with obviously moving objects in the frame (trains, shadows, people), I don't usually feel that there is a clear hierarchy.

8) After a viewing of *Sogobi* at CalArts during the semester-long retrospective of Benning's work in the Spring of 2007, a friend, the musician Christian Kesten, commented that he was surprised at how 'empty' the shots were, wondering if there was some sort of intended connection to Zen philosophy. All the time I had been marveling at how *much* there was! It struck me then how similar this discussion is to what occurs in musical circles around the experience of silence. An 'empty' image is also a full one, as 'silence' is full of sound. As Gilles Deleuze writes: "Duration is said of an existing mode." Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 1988), p. 62.

The viewer must therefore find her own reasons to continue looking and her own *way* of looking. This is conscious work, which I suppose runs against the grain of most movie watching. A Benning film is participatory in the deepest sense: if you don't concentrate on viewing and listening, you'll miss it altogether.

If one chooses, as a viewer, to engage in a sensory exercise of this kind, along with the transformation of the senses that results, a kind of calmness descends on the mind. To anyone who has had the experience of one of the longer works of La Monte Young or of John Cage, or of Morton Feldman or Alvin Lucier, this is a familiar sensation. Intense periods of focus give way to a sense of well-being and a wish to prolong the duration of the state. It's the feeling of being on an immanent plane where everything happens and nothing happens; a plane of terrific potential. The composer Antoine Beuger concerned himself with this state in an exhaustive series of pieces entitled *calme étendue* [calm extension]. There is now a whole repertoire of music that continues to attempt to place itself on this plane.[9] This is for me the deepest connection I see between Benning's work and that of recent experimental music. By means of duration, each work creates its own definite kind of stillness. This is an affect that can be as variable as the hues of blue or the tuning of a third.

9) As must be clear, the mention of a few names is but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to experimental music, a situation that has many parallels to that of experimental film. This vast, underground network, especially in its most recent incarnations, has hardly been documented in print, though there are now literally thousands of experimental music recordings. Feldman (1926–1987), Lucier (b. 1931) and Young (b. 1935) are Americans who follow in the wake of Cage. Antoine Beuger (b. 1955, Netherlands) is one of the most significant composers in a new generation of experimental musicians.

Allan Sekula

RR JB

"... for the last half hour I have heard the rattle of railway cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge ..."
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

One way to write about James Benning is to dig straightaway into the structural rigor and strange whimsy of his films.

Another way would be to take up the mythos that has come to surround him. This second route requires at least a few sentences, especially in a book published in the German-speaking world where Karl May is still read by children and transcontinental tourists think it is a terrific idea to visit Death Valley in August.

The Benning myth as I appreciate it is comprised of three compelling short narrative fragments.

First, at more or less the same age as Norman Mailer was when he wrote the *Armies of the Night*, Benning swims naked in the CalArts pool in a photograph published in *Vogue* magazine in 1989. The pool is already suspended somewhere between the sun-dazed hedonism of David Hockney and the deadpan vacuity of Ed Ruscha, so the addition of Benning's optically distorted torso to this lexicon is ambiguous. Why this photograph never became a recruiting poster for the school is a mystery yet to be explained.

Second, at a time when the aggrieved "physical plant" crew at CalArts was trying without success to join the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, James Benning began to teach in a grey-green shirt of the same uniform style as their work clothes, with his first name embroidered in red over the breast pocket. CalArts has of course always been proud of its faculty, who are as anachronistic as gas station attendants in their friendly, ever-helpful, and sub-professorial ways.

The third story is ongoing, and consists of Benning's construction of a near-replica of Henry David Thoreau's Walden cabin on property he owns in the mountains north of Los Angeles. It is rumored that Benning is using some sort of inauthentic low-maintenance composite siding better suited to a backyard toolshed.

What these three stories add up to is a seriocomic reworking of that inexhaustible and pervasive nineteenth-century theme: the American Adam.[1]

Benning's observational program follows that of Thoreau on the edge of Walden Pond. In Benning's model of art, the artist "reports back"

1) R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

James Benning in the Sierra Nevada mountains, building a replica of Henry David Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond (2007)

to his audience, much as Thoreau wrote at the end of his twenty-six months as "a sojourner in civilized life again." Of course, this is a conceit, since the railroad that passed Thoreau's cabin was his omnipresent link to society and the violent "battering ram" of commerce.[2]

In Benning's last film but one, *RR*, the railroad intrudes upon space that is only briefly and deceptively Arcadian or primordial. More than anything, his framings, however evocative of codes of the picturesque that precede the coming of the railroad, delineate spaces that were made by and for the railroad. With each passing train, the "right of way" gives itself over to the passing behemoth, becomes a mere excuse or legal license for that passing. Benning's title itself is the ubiquitous shorthand of that right-of-way, warning and territorial marker of dangerous crossings.

RR consists of 43 fixed-camera shots of varying lengths. The 'signified' (the velocity and length of the train and the acoustical register of it's approach and departure) takes precedence over the 'signifier' (the capacity of the film magazine.) Respect for the signified in this case requires a more flexible approach to duration.

2) Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* [1854] in William Rossi (ed.), *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 1992).

Prior to this film, Benning's structuralist discipline granted a Procrustean authority to the standard manufactured lengths of 16mm film available for the Bolex. With *RR*, durational authority is ceded to a more powerful machine, and in so doing suggests that not everything in the world of things and actions is given over to the tyranny of the signifier. Perhaps the railroad is too paleo-modern to be seized by spectacle, and thus remains invisible in its everyday necessity and functionality.

Benning revisits the longstanding affinity between the cinema and railroad, both of which are falsely rumored to be obsolete and irrelevant in today's world of instantaneous electronic communications. So what is at first consideration perhaps a less structuralist film than we have come to expect from Benning, may well be on the contrary his *most* adamantly structuralist film.

In talking about *RR*, Benning, who is never far from analytic geometry in his thinking about film images and film duration, has spoken of the moving train "completely defining the Z axis." Thus the railroad becomes not the

comet-like transcendental signifier imagined by Thoreau but the final guarantor of perspectival depth and illusion, the right-of-way of the Western pictorial tradition.

In a number of the shots that comprise the film, the tracks are not visible, and it is only the sound of the approaching train that gives us any idea of a new vanishing point that will come to wholly dominate the pre-existing perspectives of the scene. Thus movement introduces a marked hierarchy of perspectives that is less emphatically achieved in the timelessness of painting or still photography. Shots of this type in *RR* are all X and Y axis, mere picturesque two-dimensionality, before the train arrives. The trainless image corresponds to the free-floating pastoral reveries of Thoreau, and before him, of Nathaniel Hawthorne in Sleepy Hollow, which were rudely interrupted by the railroad whistle.[3]

RR is the compulsive serial repetition of the shattering of the pastoral scene, a shattering described by Leo Marx as the 'counterforce' to the Arcadian rhythm. And yet, often enough, Benning allows the tangential squeal of steel wheels on the curves and the clanking of the cars to subside, and the frogs and crickets and cicadas resume their chants and drumming.

This may seem to suggest a pastoral circularity to the film's overall structure. But the film is more historical than that. It begins with trains combining old fashioned box cars with oil tanks and flatbeds, and progresses over the course of the 43 shots to the double-stack container trains and road-rail intermodal trailers of the contemporary 'revolution' in global logistics, technical handmaiden to the soulless gangsterism of the neoliberal free-market program for world commerce.

There are no cabooses. No one is minding the brakes.

And as the vanishing train veers closer to the Z-axis, foreshortening eliminates the gaps between the cars, and gives us instead the image of a vibrating continuous pipeline of goods, a monstrous snake moving through the landscape, unstoppable until it meets a magical forest of windmills.

3) Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964)

Appendix

Filmography

Unless otherwise noted all films shot, edited, produced and directed by James Benning. All credits as given by James Benning. All films shot and distributed on 16mm.

did you ever hear that cricket sound? (1971)
1 min, b&w, sound
WITH: Harvey Taylor

In this short black and white study Benning uses dissolves, shifting camera angles and cross-fades to experiment with narrative structure. Although the elements of a story are connected through a male protagonist, their sequencing gives them an associative logic, like indecipherable dream images. Graphic structures like leaves of grass in close-up and metal bars are shot on high-contrast black and white film showing an interest in textures and in the composition of a two-dimensional picture surface.

Time and a Half (1972)
17 min, b&w, sound
WITH: John Krieg, Jane Gunner, Janis Kluge

"*Time and a Half* is a grim presentation of a day in the life of a factory worker who runs a drill press. The alarm wakes him up, and his wife coldly sends him off with a lunchbox. On the way to work he fantasizes about a woman he sees on the bus. He spends his hours at his job, continuing to fantasize (the fantasies are presented as brief flashes) about the woman and about football and fishing, then he goes home and watches TV until he dozes off. The film ends as he wakes up for another cycle. *Time and a Half* has an eerie, dreamlike quality, partly as a result of the soundtrack, which is rather horrific: it's dominated by a monotonous grinding sound and by the sounds of the drill press; the only voices we hear are on the radio and TV (...)." (Scott MacDonald, *Afterimage*, Dec 1981)

Art Hist. 101 (1972)
[a film by James Benning & Mike Milligan]
17 min, color and b&w, sound
WITH: Mike Milligan
PRODUCED AT the University of Wisconsin

Art Hist. 101 is a portrait of Benning's friend Mike Milligan on the occasion of Milligan getting his degree in ceramic studies at Illinois University. Benning himself jokingly calls this a "commissioned" work and a "crazy kind of juvenile art school film." In a crude mix of youthfully impetuous ideas Benning pursues Milligan's performances and tries to connect these narratives that have more to do with the visual rendition of a joke or word play. At the same time he is building beyond these performances, using methods tested in prior works such as close-ups, interest in textures and different levels of an entirely synthetic soundtrack.

Ode to Muzak (1972)
3 min, color, sound
WITH: Sharon Sampon, Robert Bick
SOUND: *A Shot in the Dark* by Henry Mancini from *The Pink Panther* (Blake Edwards, UK/USA 1963)
COMMISSIONED FOR the nationally syndicated TV show *The Mancini Generation*

Ode to Muzak was commissioned for a television show dedicated to Henry Mancini, the renowned film composer. The filmmakers were required to use a piece by Mancini. Benning chooses *A Shot in the Dark* from *The Pink Panther* and takes the title literally: he films a long tracking shot of a neighborhood largely inhabited by blacks. This shot is repeatedly interrupted by a close-up of a woman putting on lipstick and the image of a man preparing some heroin and shooting up while the music is increasingly distorted over the course of the film. Mancini as well as the producers hated the film and due to its content it was never aired.

Honeylane Road (1973)
8 min, color, sound
BASED ON a short story by Charlie Kempthorn
WITH: Robert Bick, John Fuller, Gilbert Hemsley, Jerome Haslbeck, Frederick Krause, Susan Krause, James Sampon
PRODUCED AT the University of Wisconsin
FILMED IN Madison, Wisconsin

A man wants to buy a pistol at a pawn shop and is prevented from committing suicide. Benning deconstructs the narrative trajectory of this short story in various ways: he repeats shots from a slightly shifted perspective; laconic close-ups of living room interiors alternate with images from entirely other contexts. Like in prior works, the sound fluctuates between extremely clear and recognizable noises that do not necessarily correspond to the image and an indefinable, abstract buzz. The rapid shifting between close-ups, slow motion and jump-cuts that culminate towards the end of the film shapes its rhythm.

57 (1973, lost)
7 min, color, sound
PRODUCED AT the University of Wisconsin
This short experiment reveals an interest in the materiality of film and exploring optical possibilities. Benning manipulates the found footage of a tomato exploding in ultra-slow-motion through his use of bleach in the film developing process.

Michigan Avenue (1973)
[a film by Bette Gordon & James Benning]
6 min, color, sound
WITH: Lissa Hirsch, Debby Lippman
PRODUCED AT the University of Wisconsin
FILMED IN Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin

"[A] sensuous, haunting filmic tryptich, which presents brief moments from the lives of two women. Each of the film's three sections is optically printed so as to engage the viewer in a meditation of the formal qualities of the miraculous seam between stillness and motion. In the first section we see a woman walking on a busy city street; in the second the women are sitting close together facing the camera; in the third they lie naked on a bed together (...)."
(Scott MacDonald, *Afterimage*, Dec 1981)
Michigan Avenue "strips the narrative down to its most essential elements: a beginning, a middle and an end. The viewer is left to construct his own story from these fragments of information." (Christine Tamblyn, *The New Art Examiner*, 1973)

Gleem (1974, lost)
2 min, color, sound
PRODUCED AT the University of Wisconsin
This film is optically printed and interweaves two short sequences of tooth brushing on odd numbered frames and a close-up of a penis ejaculating on even numbered frames.

i-94 (1974)
[a film by Bette Gordon & James Benning]
3 min, color, sound
WITH: Bette Gordon, James Benning
PRODUCED AT the University of Wisconsin
FILMED IN Madison, Wisconsin under the I94 freeway bridge

"*i-94* alternates individual frames selected from two actions which take place on a railroad track which passes under a highway overpass: a naked woman (Gordon) walks away from the camera; a naked man (Benning) walks toward the camera. We watch both actions at the

James Benning

Timeline

1942 Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on December 28, 1942. As a young boy he works in a drugstore, as a gardener, makes pizzas, and cleans furnaces.

1960 His high school baseball team wins City Championship.

1961 Graduates from Washington High School, Milwaukee, January, 1961; National Honor Society.
Begins studying mathematics at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.
Watches Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* on Public Television.

1963 Drops out of College for a semester and works in a Milwaukee machine shop that later becomes the film location for *Time and a Half*.

1966 Graduates from University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee in June with a Bachelor's degree in mathematics.
Sells his car and most of his belongings to travel through Europe for the summer.
In September begins Graduate School in mathematics at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee.

1967 Drops out of Graduate School, moves to Colorado, works with migrant farm workers in the San Luis Valley.
In October moves to Springfield, Missouri to do community organizing in a poor black/white ghetto.
Returns briefly to Milwaukee to join protest marches lead by Father James Groppi.

1968 In spring attends a community organizing conference in Denver; meets the radical organizer, Rennie Davis; while in Denver buys a 8mm Bolex camera.
In fall moves to Saint Elizabeth, Missouri to teach math in a small rural high school; lives on a cattle farm; goes coon hunting with the high school boys; makes his first 8mm film (lost), a portrait of prairie grass along the Osage River.

1969 Returns to Milwaukee to continue graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin— Milwaukee as a teaching assistant with full scholarship.
Volunteers to teach math at an independent high school started by Milwaukee high school dropouts; meets Jake Fuller here.
Continues to make short 8mm films (all lost), one is about his bluetick coonhound, Morgan.

1970 Graduates from the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee with a Master's degree in mathematics.
Moves to a hunting cabin in the Adirondack Mountains to teach mathematics at Paul Smith's College in Paul Smiths, New York.

1971 Trades his 8mm Bolex in for a Rex 3, 16mm Bolex.
Gets fired from Paul Smith's College for organizing students to protest against the Vietnam War.
Moves to Milwaukee for the summer and makes first 16mm film, *did you ever hear that cricket sound?* that later shows at the Chicago International Film Festival, his first public screening.
In fall moves to Madison, Wisconsin and takes a 16mm filmmaking class with James Heddle at the University of Wisconsin; begins making *Time and a Half* which shows at the 1974 Cannes Film Festival, his first European screening.

1972 Begins Graduate School; creates a curriculum between the Department of Communication Arts and the Department of Art setting up the first MFA program in film at the University of Wisconsin; is a Teaching Assistant with full Scholarship.

1973 Birth of only child, Sadie Benning, in Madison, Wisconsin, April 11, 1973.

Begins three year collaboration with Bette Gordon making *Michigan Avenue* (1973), *I-94* (1974), and *The United States of America* (1975).

1975 Graduates from the University of Wisconsin with a Master of Fine Arts degree in Film and Graphic Arts. He shows both serigraphs and films at his Graduate show.
Moves to Evanston, Illinois to teach filmmaking at Northwestern University (Assistant Professor); invites Hollis Frampton to Northwestern University.
Trades Rex 3 Bolex for a new EBM Bolex which he still uses today.

1977 In January quits teaching at Northwestern and moves back to Milwaukee, Wisconsin; teaches a Graduate Seminar at the University of Wisconsin, spring semester (Visiting Faculty, Art); meets Michael Snow at a 20th Century Studies Conference at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee.

Meets Yvonne Rainer after a screening of *11 × 14* at New Directors/New Films, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
In fall moves to Norman, Oklahoma to teach film and photography at the University of Oklahoma (Visiting Professor, Art); meets John Knecht and Alan Berliner.

1978 In summer, spends eight weeks at Artpark in Lewiston, New York, building his first film installation, *Four Oil Wells*.

Moves to Del Mar, California to teach filmmaking at the University of California—San Diego (Visiting Faculty, Art); shares a beach house with Jean-Pierre Gorin; meets Jean-Luc Godard, Manny Farber, and Alan Kaprow.

1979 Moves back to Norman, Oklahoma to teach filmmaking and film theory at the University of Oklahoma (Associate Professor, Art):
Builds *Oklahoma*, a film installation at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
Meets Rhonda Bell.
Witnesses the death of a close friend which affects the subject of all his films made in the 1980s.

1980 Moves to lower Manhattan in New York City; lives here for eight years, the only time in his professional life he does not teach and solely lives from grants received for his film work; meets Peter Hutton and Donald Lipski.

1981 Makes two film installations: *Double Yodel* at the Chinsegut Film & Video Festival in St. Petersburg Beach, Florida where he meets Chip Lord and Dick Rogers, and *Last Dance* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Meets Scott MacDonald for the first in a series of interviews.

1985 Makes his only computer installation *Pascal's Lemma*, installed first at The Kitchen in New York and then at the Museum School in Boston, Massachusetts.
Collaborates with writer Burt Barr on *O Panama*, his last collaboration to date.
Meets Trisha Brown.

1987 Moves to Val Verde, California to teach in the School of Film and Video at California Institute of the Arts (Faculty); two weeks before he moves, due to a fire in his loft (caused by an electrical problem in his Steenbeck editing table), a number of his prints burn and the original material for *O Panama* is lost. Although initially he was invited to teach for just one year, he remains teaching at CalArts since.

Meets Thom Andersen, Craig Smith, Kris Malkiewicz, Billy Woodberry, Dick Hebdige, Nina Menkes, Allan Sekula, Sharon Lockhart, Hartmut Bitomsky, Harun Farocki, Rebecca Baron, Bérénice Reynaud, Janet Sarbanes.

1996 Meets Alexander Horwath.

1998 Teaches a summer school course in filmmaking for the MFA program at Bard College where he reads Henry David Thoreau's *Walden Pond;* choreographs *Border Crossing*, a minimalist dance with three dancers, during that time.
Meets Werner Dütsch of WDR (West German Television, Cologne); WDR begins a 9 year period of support through co-productions and purchases of broadcast rights.

2001 Meets Lucinda Williams.
Spends the summer at Dongseo University in Busan, Korea (Visiting Faculty) were he teaches a summer school course in filmmaking.

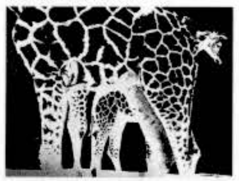
2002 Meets Julie Ault.

2003 Begins copying the paintings of Bill Traylor and Mose Tolliver.
Meets Reinhard Wulf of WDR who directs *James Benning. Circling the Image* (Germany 2003), a documentary on his film practice.

2007 Builds a copy of Thoreau's Walden Pond cabin in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

same time (the film reminds me of a thaumatrope), as we hear Gordon and Benning talking simultaneously; the volume of Gordon's comments (she reveals her frustration at not being taken seriously) is progressively lowered, as the volume of Benning's comments (he talks about changes he's been going through) is raised." (Scott MacDonald, *Afterimage*, Dec 1981)

8½ × 11 (1974)
32 min, color, sound
WITH: Serafina Bathrick, Bette Gordon, Harvey Taylor, Rick Goodwin, Tim Welsh
PRODUCED AT the University of Wisconsin
FILMED IN Wisconsin



"*8½ × 11* is a series of twenty-eight vignettes, which intercut two narratives: two women drive along the interstates, stop and pick up two young men, go to a motel with them to have sex, drop them off and continue their trip; a farmworker hitchhikes to a job, works, rests, then hitchhikes on. The two narratives meet only in the final shot—as the farmworker takes a bath in a creek, we see the two women's car pass over the bridge that spans the creek in the background. The narrative structure of *8½ × 11*, as well as the mood of the mid-American locations and Benning's seemingly detached attitude towards his material, is strongly reminiscent of the John Dos Passos novels *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.* (...). While each of the vignettes is part of one of the narratives, we are consistently aware of formal elements reflecting Benning's fascination with perspective (...), and with composition, lighting and sound." (Scott MacDonald, *Afterimage*, Dec 1981)

The United States of America (1975)
[a film by James Benning & Bette Gordon]
27 min, color, sound
WITH: Bette Gordon, James Benning
PRODUCED AT the University of Wisconsin
FILMED ON a trip from New York to California

In the Spring of 1975 Benning and Gordon drive from New York City straight through the country all the way to California. They spend eleven days on the road gathering material for the film. A camera is affixed to the backseat of a car, aimed forward and shooting the passengers from behind, who take turns at the wheel and flank both sides of the screen. All the sound was recorded on the trip and later edited with the images. Brief views are seen from the vantage point of the car as it crosses the continent, an epic trip condensed in time. The USA passes before our eyes in the form of a continuous linear locomotion witnessed through the windshield—a road movie in the purest sense of the word.
"The seemingly relaxed feel of the image is undermined by the intermittent radio broadcasts which announce (as the car travels toward LA) news of the approach of the North Vietnamese to Saigon." (Amy Taubin, *Soho News*, 1977)

An Erotic Film (1975, lost)
11 min, color, sound
WITH: Bette Gordon, James Benning
PRODUCED AT the University of Wisconsin
Benning again experiments with the optical printer, using negative and positive copies of a scene showing a couple making love, which in turn is presented as a double-projection.

Saturday Night (1975)
2 min, color, sound
WITH: James Benning
PRODUCED AT the University of Wisconsin

Benning here deploys the animation technique of matting. We see a person we eventually recognize as a man rolling a stocking up his leg as he slowly stands up and leaves the frame. The scene is observed by a static camera and takes place in an empty room while the blue sky with clouds passing overhead and later the moon are matted into the windows. The interlinking of different modes of time and reality produces a surreal and dream-like setting.

9-1-75 (1975)
22 min, color, sound
FILMED AT Mauthe Lake Campground, Wisconsin
"A 22 minute tracking shot through a Wisconsin campground on Labor Day. Most of the sound was recorded on location, and some wasn't." (James Benning)

The camera is mounted to the side of a car and shoots at constant speed. The gaze is directed for 22 minutes upon this camping site where nothing much happens, documenting the everyday life of the campers in this resurrection of suburbia. What upon initial viewing appears as a straightforward and authentic rendering is revealed as a fabrication on closer examination. The film's barely perceptible slow motion is surpassed by a more substantial manipulation of the senses that happens by way of the soundtrack. The usual noise of a camping site taped at location—including children at play, cars, radio transmissions, and television broadcasts—is imperceptibly joined by other sounds, creating a tension that steadily builds.

3 minutes on the dangers of film recording (1975)
3 min, color, sound
WITH: James Benning

At Northwestern University, where he teaches at the time, Benning gives a short interview to some student filmmakers. He then uses this material to once again engage the optical printer. Throughout the film the image shows a close-up shot of his face answering the students' question while the words are displaced to such a degree that they reveal their meaning only through gradual repetition.

Chicago Loop (1976)
9 min, color, sound
COMMISSIONED BY The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago for a group show of films about Chicago

The three segments of *Chicago Loop* were edited in camera and experiment with the fragmentation of space and movement through pixilation. Meticulously structured by mathematical principles the film was made to be played back and forward and breaks the representation of time and space wide open, its aural dimension equally fragmented given the chopped soundtrack.
"[A] kinetically spectacular film which jams variations of Snow's *Back and Forth* and *Standard Time*, and Gehr's *Serene Velocity* into nine minutes to come up with something different from any of them." (Amy Taubin, *Soho News*, 1976)

A to B (1976)
2 min, color, silent

The film is silent, a piece of paper in a typewriter is the focus of attention. *A to B* is in fact an animation film: seemingly arbitrary rows of letters appear on the page typed by invisible hands. Certain letters are continually repeated in ever-changing combinations: A, B, C, E, F, H, I, L, M, R, T, U, according to a code that cannot be cracked instantly. The explicit comprehensibility of the film is of secondary importance: the phrase "America the Beautiful" can be made out only for a couple of seconds, before this meaning is obscured again by the relentless succession of letters.

11 × 14 (1976)
80 min, color, sound
WITH: Serafina Bathrick, Paddy Whannel, Bette Gordon, Barbara Frankel, Harvey Taylor, Rick Goodwin, Tim Welsh, Ted Brady, Michael O'Brien
MADE WITH support from The American Film Institute in association with The National Endowment for the Arts
FILMED IN Wisconsin, Illinois, and South Dakota

"*11 × 14* consists of some sixty-six [sic! 65] shots, most apparently with synchronized natural sound and separated from one another by momentary black spacing. (...) The majority of shots are static, although some include pans and tracks. A number of 'sets' occurs throughout the film: bill-boards, film references and quotations, photographic allusions to classic American photography. One's first impression is of a quasi-narrative work, where the elusive repetitions of 'characters' and 'locations' are held together in a mix of images that predominantly depict movement and travel. From this perspective *11 × 14* can be seen as a kind of 'deconstructed' road movie and the spectator is tempted to try to discover a pattern amid the constant journeying and occasional incidents (...). Much of the film's fascination undoubtedly has to do with the constant play on absence and presence. (...) These concerns with off screen space, minimal and displaced narrative, and with modernist inflections of the landscape genre, are not unique to *11 × 14*. But few recent American films have provided such an elegant and intriguing demonstration of renewal in filmic imagination." (Ian Christie, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 1978)

One Way Boogie Woogie (1977)
60 min, color, sound
WITH: Sadie Benning, Anita Benning, Bette Gordon, Howard Monath, Tim Taylor, Fred Krause, Susan Krause, Jake Fuller, Don Skoller, Jeffrey Skoller, Julia Fuller, James Benning, Bob Danner, Heather Sampon, Sharon Sampon, Sammy Sampon, Barbara, Trish
MADE WITH support from Wisconsin Arts Board
FILMED IN Milwaukee, Wisconsin

"In 1977 I shot *One Way Boogie Woogie* in Milwaukee's industrial valley. The valley divides the city—to the north is Milwaukee's Black ghetto, to the south a Polish working class community. As a kid I played there, hopping freight trains and fishing in the Menomenee River. In 1977 the valley was beginning to die. Factories were moving out. The steel foundries were rusting. And the stockyard all but closed. I wanted to document its decay. Using friends, family, and three Volkswagens (red, blue, and green), I shot in March on brightly lit days creating 60 one-minute narratives. The film used was Ektachrome Commercial (Kodak 7252), a fine grain reversal stock." (James Benning, *Berlinale 2005 catalogue*)

Grand Opera. An Historical Romance (1979)
84 min, color, sound
WITH: Sadie Benning, John Hadley, Hollis Frampton, George Landow, Yvonne Rainer, Michael Snow
FILMED IN Oklahoma, California, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, New York

Grand Opera once again uses the established aesthetic element of static shots of recurring motifs—city and landscapes, this time in Oklahoma, bill-boards, streets, industrial landscapes, gas containers, oil drilling rigs, traffic signs—weaving them together with short scenes, textual inserts, experiments with film aesthetics and short homages to Hollis Frampton, George Landow, Michael Snow and Yvonne Rainer, who also appear in the film. Leaving the strict structure of earlier films behind Benning describes his approach as "sampling without a script," as a game that plays with the material. This artistic stock-taking and examination of both personal history and the history of cinema is described by him as a "first attempt at writing my own kind of history."

Him and Me (1981)
87 min, color, sound
WITH: Rhonda Bell, Rebecca Pauly, Annette Michelson, Art Schade, Mina, Raybeats, Howard Monath, Sadie, Mitch Ponder, Jene Highstein, Robert Younger
CO-PRODUCER: ZDF—Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, Germany
FILMED IN New York City, NY

Him and Me revolves around two protagonists, Jean and Dave. Their story takes place in New York and Benning stages the cityscapes with his usual aesthetic brilliance in a quasi documentary mode. Again the narration is fragmented, leaving the viewers to deal with the gaps. But both Jean and Dave divulge personal information over the course of the film, leaving a trace that makes it possible to understand their connection in retrospect. At the same time, Benning uses a variety of formal devices to refer to political events like the Vietnam War or the Iranian hostage crisis that shaped both his personal as well as collective views on the ideological stance of the United States.

American Dreams (lost and found) (1984)
55 min, color, sound

"As the soundtrack unfolds a collage of popular songs (Peggy Lee, Charlie Rich, Bob Dylan ...) and public speeches recorded from 1954 to 1976 (McCarthy Hearings, radio announcement of the Kennedy assassination, an address by Malcolm X ...), the screen is filled with images of baseball cards spanning the career of Hank Aaron, while at the bottom Benning has optically printed handwritten excerpts of the diary of Arthur Bremer, who shot Governor Wallace in 1972, faithfully reproducing its idiosyncracies and misspellings. Each of these elements defines its own imaginary landscape. The soundtrack suggests an ideological 'map' of America at the time. The visuals imply a gap between a successful (black) home run champion and a (failed) white drifter-turned-assassin, one hitting the American dream and the other missing it. Finally, Bremer's solitary travels (Wisconsin, New York, Canada, Michigan, Maryland) in search of the perfect opportunity to shoot a man—not unlike Benning's own lonely travels throughout America, in search of the perfect image to shoot—draw another imaginary map across the continent." (Bérénice Reynaud, *Film Comment*, Nov/Dec 1996)

O Panama (1985)
[a film by James Benning & Burt Barr]
27 min, color, sound
BASED ON original stories by Burt Barr
WITH: Willem Dafoe, Sebastian Moore Benefield, Joseph Gurley, Thomas Gurley, Craig Miller
PRODUCER Susan Dowling, New Television Workshop, WGBH, Boston
MADE WITH support from The Massachusetts State Council on the Arts and Humanities New Works Program and The Contemporary Art Television Fund
FILMED IN New York City and Chittenango Falls State Park, Cazenovia, NY

Based on three of his short stories writer Burt Barr collaborated with James Benning in the realization of this film.
O Panama observes a young man who falls ill. He goes in and out of daydreams, weaving together realty and imaginations/hallucination, all the while being confined to his appartment.
"*O Panama's* elegant montage denotes a subject that is always on the verge of collapse. This episodic narrative 'opens spaces in the film where the audience can enter into the story with its own experiences'." (*Canyon cinema catalogue*, www.canyoncinema.com)

Landscape Suicide (1986)
93 min, color, sound
WITH: Rhonda Bell, Elion Sacker, Eve E. Ellis, Lisbeth Jetton, Pegge Winslow, John Benning, Rusty Johnson
VOICES: Dorothy Zeidman, Chris Cordes, Ira Shapiro, Ron Vawter
MADE WITH support from New York State Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation
FILMED IN Orinda, California and Plainfield, Wisconsin

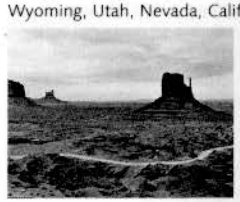
In a dense collage of diverse material—from police and media reports and photographs to his hallmark static shots of city and landscapes—Benning confronts two murder cases, attempting to reconstruct the crimes and police investigations. The film revolves around the two compelling reenactments of interviews with the murderers. In this exploration of their respective environments he draws an image both of the mental condition of the offenders as well as of the communities where the crimes happened.

"[T]he murderers in James Benning's *Landscape Suicide* are a paranoiac teenage girl and a taciturn Wisconsin farmer. The reconstructive narratives take the viewer through the slants of minds in disturbance, through the ambiguities that surround any act of violence. (...) The homicides allow Benning to deal in emotion that is external to him (yet deeply felt), while imbuing his trademark 'still' images of roads, trucks, billboards, buildings and trees with newly charged meaning. (...) There is no actual violence here—save the disembowelment of a deer—but *Landscape Suicide* leaves you feeling like a witness nonetheless." (Katherine Dieckman, *The Village Voice*, 1986)

Used Innocence (1988)
94 min, color, sound
WITH: Kevin Henderson, Linda Clements, Jean Miner, Michael Weber, Sue Choate
VOICES: James Benning, Laurie Bembenek, Dick Blau, Jake Fuller, Ron Vawter
MADE WITH support from Guggenheim Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts
FILMED IN Milwaukee and Fond du Lac, Wisconsin

Again Benning approaches a murder case, this time that of Wisconsin native Lawrencia Bembenek, convicted for the murder of her husband's ex-wife she claims she has not committed. While Benning uses similar formal devices as in *Landscape Suicide*—i.e. off screen voice, re-enactments, a collage of factual material like trial transcripts or media reports, outside shots of the community where the murder happened—this film is much more personal, not least because Benning got to know Bembenek and uses their correspondence in the film. Thus he conveys a picture of both her and his state of mind while considering questions of justice and law in a wider perspective.

North on Evers (1991)
87 min, color, sound
FILMED ON a trip from Val Verde to New York (through California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia, Washington DC, Maryland, New York) and back West (through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, California)



"*North on Evers* is Benning's *Easy Rider*. It chronicles two motorcycle trips across the United States—each from his home in the small town of Val Verde to New York (...), then back west (...)—during two successive summers. The first trip is presented as a handwritten text that scrolls from right to left across the bottom of the screen; the second is documented in image and sound recorded a year later as Benning revisited the places and people he had seen on the original trip. By the time he returns to Val Verde, he and we have not only seen something of American place at the conclusion of the twentieth century, we have also considered dimensions of our shared history. On both trips Benning visits old friends and a variety of sites and memorials of events that were crucial during the sixties, for Benning a particularly formative decade (...)." (Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5*, 2006)

Deseret (1995)
81 min, b&w and color, sound
VOICE: Fred Gardner
MADE WITH support from The Rockefeller Foundation
FILMED IN Utah

"As befits its structuralist maker, the film examines the imposition of human design, both physical and conceptual, on nature. A chain of beautiful, static shots frame details of Utah's landscapes, from windswept waters, to snowy pines, to immobile oil derricks and silent government buildings. Meanwhile, texts from the *New York Times* describing the state's social history, 1852 to the present, are read in voice over. Just as the terrain is contained within human constructs—Indian paints mark rocks, graffiti mark the Indian paintings, the graffiti are enclosed in the filmmaker's frame—the state's human inhabitants are circumscribed by the stringent codes of Brigham Young and his burgeoning Mormon sect—fascinatingly described in the *Times* pieces—and that group's resistance to outside control and interference. ('Deseret' was the people's original choice, rejected by Washington, for the state's name.) Benning imposes his own strictly defined filmic formula, and it's that intriguing complicity that gives *Deseret* the authority to transcend mere prettiness." (Hazel-Dawn Dumpert, *LA Weekly*, 1995)

Four Corners (1997)
79 min, color, sound
VOICES: Hartmut Bitomsky, James Benning, Yeasup Song, Billy Woodberry
FILMED IN Chaco Canyon (New Mexico), Milwaukee (Wisconsin), Mesa Verde (Colorado), Farmington (New Mexico)

"*Four Corners* idiosyncratically uses scrolled thumbnail bios and a single representative canvas from four visual artists (Claude Monet, Alabaman primitivist Mose Tolliver, a native American canyon-wall conjecturally born in 142 A.D., and Jasper Johns) as 'chapter headings' that kick off separate segments of precisely 13 shots investigating one location each. (...) *Four Corners* actually manages to make palpable the vast timetable of topographical and ethnic migration history, as well as the more densely dramatic, familiar history of actual recorded human personalities and events. The immediate viewing experience, however, is meditative, serene, even elegant." (Dennis Harvey, *Variety*, 1998)

UTOPIA (1998)
91 min, color, sound
SOUND: Complete soundtrack from *Ernesto Che Guevara, The Bolivian Diary* (Richard Dindo, Switzerland/France 1994)
FILMED IN Southern California (Death Valley, Las Vegas, 29 Palms US Marine Training Base, Palm Springs, Salton Sea, Imperial Valley) and Mexicali, Mexico.

This film, composed of a series of static shots taken in the South California desert marks a transition in Benning's work between the preceding two text-image films and the 'California Trilogy'. He confronts his footage with a soundtrack entirely appropriated from another film, Richard Dindo's *Ernesto Che Guevara, The Bolivian Diary*.

"I transferred Dindo's soundtrack to magnetic film and then counted frames to measure the length of each section of the film's narration. Then I did a shot for each paragraph of the film. It was a very economical process. After I did all the shots—I think there were 156 shots in the film, and I shot maybe 250—I put them in those slide holders that hold 16mm film, and I actually edited the film on slides as I read the text. Once I had the order figured out, then I went back and cut the work print to the sound. The whole process is kind of a poor man's Avid system". (James Benning, as quoted by Holly Willis, *L.A. Weekly*, Jan 27 1999)

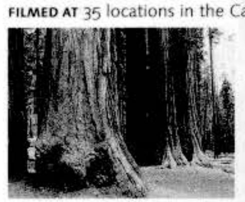
El Valley Centro (1999)
90 min, color, sound
FILMED AT 35 locations in the Great Central Valley, California

Images of the agricultural and water supply industries prevail in *El Valley Centro*, a rigidly composed series of views of the vast agricultural landscapes of California's Central Valley and the first film in what has become known as the 'California Trilogy'. Irrigation systems and machines for sowing and harvesting become laconic 'actors' in a film that is both rigid in structure—35 shots, each 2½ minutes long—and subtle in its allusions to the political forces that pervade the region: the credit sequence annotates the corporate ownership for each individual place featured.

Los (2000)
90 min, color, sound
FILMED AT 35 locations in Greater Los Angeles, California

"Midsection in veteran experimental filmmaker James Benning's triptych of features about the California landscape, *Los* reflects the reluctance with which the director resides near its subject, Los Angeles. (...) Each 2½-minute shot trains a dispassionate eye on functional areas: a dump, a refining plant, a tangle of highway underpasses, a strip mall, joggers on a traffic island. Even the most peopled location, an intersection outside a county jail, is viewed distantly enough to avoid overt commentary. Yet Benning's choices do add up to something, a troubled acknowledgement of impersonality, pollution, and general man-made eradication of natural landscape. As usual, his compositional eye is stunning, making each potentially interminable shot hold attention." (Dennis Harvey, *Variety*, 2003)

Sogobi (2001)
90 min, color, sound
FILMED AT 35 locations in the California wilderness



"*Sogobi*, which means 'earth' in Shoshonean, follows 1999's *El Valley Centro* and 2000's *Los*, which explored California's Great Central Valley and Los Angeles, respectively. Assembled over a year spent alone in the state's wilderness, images include sandstorms, snowstorms, petroglyphs and cacti, with gradual encroachment of industry becoming apparent in both manmade structures and increased aural hum of traffic. (...) Tech credits are spare yet crisp; as the artist said to one Berlin crowd of his fondness for the endangered yet preferred 16mm format, 'It's getting cheaper with digital video, but that isn't filmmaking'." (Eddie Cockrell, *Variety*, 2002)

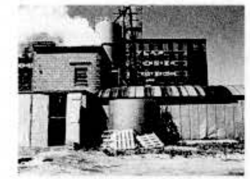
13 LAKES (2004)
133 min, color, sound
CO-PRODUCER: WDR—Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Germany

Static shots, ten minutes each, of thirteen large lakes across the United States: Jackson Lake (Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming), Moosehead Lake (Greenville Junction, Maine), Salton Sea (Bombay Beach, California), Lake Superior (Superior, Wisconsin), Lake Winnebago (Fond du Lac, Wisconsin), Lake Okeechobee (Port Mayca, Florida), Lower Red Lake (Chippewa Nation, Minnesota), Lake Pontchartrain (New Orleans, Louisiana), Great Salt Lake (Antelope Island, Utah), Lake Iliamna (Kokhanok, Alaska), Lake Powell (Page, Arizona), Crater Lake (Crater Lake National Park, Oregon), Oneida Lake (Verona Beach, New York).

TEN SKIES (2004)
102 min, color, sound
CO-PRODUCER: WDR—Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Germany
FILMED IN Val Verde, Pine Flat and Trona, California

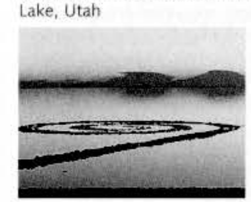
"One of this unique filmmaker's greatest works, and on paper, one of his most minimalist: ten shots of the sky, each lasting ten minutes. But the experience of watching—and hearing—it is fabulously rich and intense. The skyscapes are filled with life and change at the speed of light. The soundtrack creates an equally rich narrative space by way of ten short stories that are 'insinuated' without ever being 'explained'. A masterpiece." (Alexander Horwath, *Film Comment*, Jan/Feb 2005)

One Way Boogie Woogie/27 Years Later (1977/2004)
120 min, color, sound
WITH: Sadie Benning, Bette Gordon, Howard Monath, Tim Taylor, Fred Krause, Susan Krause, Jake Fuller, Julia Fuller, James Benning, Bob Danner, Heather Sampon, Sharon Sampon, Barbara, Trish
MADE WITH support from Wisconsin Arts Board (1977) and The Rockefeller Foundation (2004)
FILMED IN Milwaukee, Wisconsin



"In 1977 I shot *One Way Boogie Woogie* in Milwaukee's industrial valley. Then 27 years later I decided to make the same film again. I located all 60 prior camera positions and most of my old friends and family. Things had changed with age. A few people had died, some of the buildings were gone. I shot in June with gray skies using a fine grain negative stock, Kodak 7245. I used the same soundtrack from the old film, cutting the new images to it. The resulting film, *One Way Boogie Woogie/27 Years Later* is now the two films shown together—first the old then the new. It is a film about memory and aging." (James Benning, *Berlinale 2005 catalogue*)

casting a glance (2007)
80 min, color, sound
FILMED AT the *Spiral Jetty* on Rozel Point in the Great Salt Lake, Utah



A film dedicated to an artwork James Benning has repeatedly filmed during his career and regards as one of the most important of the 20th century: the *Spiral Jetty*, a giant earthwork realized by the artist Robert Smithson in 1970 at the Great Salt Lake in Utah.
"In order to experience the Jetty one must go often. It is a barometer for both daily and yearly cycles. From morning to night its allusive, shifting appearance (radical or subtle) may be the result of a passing weather system

or simply the changing angle of the sun. The water may appear blue, red, purple, green, brown, silver or gold. The sound may come from a navy jet, passing geese, converging thunderstorms, a few crickets, or be a silence so still you can hear the blood moving through the veins in your ears." (James Benning, *Off Screen Space/ Somewhere Else*, 2007)

RR (2007)
112 min, color, sound
CO-PRODUCER: WDR—Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Germany
FILMED AT 43 locations in Alabama, California, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Utah, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming

43 shots of various freight trains in the United States, their length determined by how long it takes the train to enter, pass through and leave the frame. Benning stages overwhelming landscape panoramas and in each static shot he plays with visual sensations caused by a constant alternation of revealing and concealing the dimensions of filmic space. Most of the time landscape seems to function as a backdrop for Benning's life-long fascination with trains. Once again he succeeds in connecting these images to geographic, social and political history: six broadcast inserts are spread throughout the film; they seem to be emanating from the surrounds of the respective shots—the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," a baseball game from 1992 along with a Karen Carpenter Coke ad from 1970, Gregory Peck reading from the "Book of Revelation," Woody Guthrie singing "This Land is Your Land," Eisenhower's 1961 farewell speech cautioning about the military industrial complex and finally the protest song "Fuck the Police" by hip-hop band N.W.A.

Installations

Four Oil Wells (1978)
film, 4 screens
Artpark, Lewiston, NY
Four large wooden screens (16' × 20') are situated within the Artpark grounds. With the onset of darkness, film loops of 15 seconds length each are projected showing four continuously pumping oil rigs.
"Four Screens: approach as sculpture fit in the landscape. (...) Film projection: approach as change in context, that is, film outdoors rather than in theatre; Oklahoma oilwells in former New York dump; daytime images existing at night; approach as sculpture—use four different wells filmed straight on to enhance two-dimensional space. (...) sculptural relationship of wells will change from different viewing positions (...) The surface quality of each film image depends on the distance it is viewed from. Because of large projection area (16' × 20'), if viewed from close-up the image will become abstracted. (...) At dusk, the wells set into the landscape, appear natural, but as it gets darker, the images assert themselves as two-dimensional rectangles—becoming sur-real; approach as sound sculptures—uniquely different sound for each well (...); approach as spacial play (...)." (James Benning, *Artpark 1978 catalogue*)

Oklahoma (1979)
film, 2 screens
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
"The piece consists of two looped film images approximately actual-size, pumping oil rigs projected at night onto white screens hung against the facade of Walker Art Center. The dark color of the building causes it to be somewhat invisible at night, so that the oil rigs seem to exist in three dimensions and independent of any other structure. [Benning] is constructing an illusion that is purposely destroyed when investigated in order to offer the viewer a new way of experiencing art. The first stage (...) is the surprise of recognition followed by a reaction of humor and curiosity brought about by the surreal and hallucinatory spatial and temporal displacement engendered by this work. We are then drawn into an investigation of the work. We walk up to the screens, seeing and hearing parts of the work from various vantage points. We make several discoveries about our perception of scale and distance, two and three-dimensional images, the nature of film images (when seen close-up, the images appear grainy and abstract, from far away they are oil rigs), the effect of the film images, sound and movements on the environment around them and vice versa. These discoveries lead to an accumulated knowledge about the work. We know what it is, how it works and we also know about our own process of perceiving the work." (Melinda Ward, *Design Quarterly*, 1979)

Double Yodel (1981)
film, 2 screens (no documentation)
Chinsegut Film & Video Festival, St. Petersburg Beach, FL
Two 16mm loops of a cowboy and a Swiss person yodelling, both played by John Hadley, are projected on opposite sides of a swimming pool.

Last Dance (1981)
film, 4 screens (no documentation)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
Last Dance is a continuation of the "Oilwell series." It was projected into a four walled room Benning built into the second floor film theater.

Pascal's Lemma (1985)
computer
The Kitchen, New York, NY; Boston Museum School, Boston, MA
For the computer installation *Pascal's Lemma* Benning takes mathematician Blaise Pascal as his point of departure, interweaving his achievements in the field of projective geometry, probability theory and logic with biographical information, specifically alluding to Pascal's religious delusions. An overkill of information is thrown into the mix, including contemporary pictograms, news reports, and direct statements addressed to the audience. *Pascal's Lemma* engenders a conglomeration of reflections upon mathematical systems of order and their influence upon artists. It can only be accessed on computer processors with a low CPU speed.

One Way Boogie Woogie (2001)
video/DVD, 1 screen
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (Nov 10, 2001–Jun 16, 2002); Miami Art Museum (Jun 20–Sep 7, 2003); Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington (Oct 10, 2003–Jan 4, 2004); Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg (Sep 8–Dec 5, 2004); Plains Art Museum, Fargo (Jan 13–Mar 27, 2005)
One Way Boogie Woogie was transferred to video and projected from DVD in the Walker Art Center exhibition "American Tableaux," which then toured in the USA and Canada.

California Trilogy (2005)
video/DVD, 1 screen
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
In 2005 the Walker Art Center purchased 16mm prints of the 'California Trilogy'—*El Valley Centro* (1999), *Los* (2000), *Sogobi* (2001)—for the Edmond R. Ruben Film and Video Study Collection. With James Benning's permission, the films were transferred to video and DVD screening copies were made for a three-month cycle of the trilogy. Each of the three films was projected on video in the 70-seat Lecture Room for daily screenings during gallery hours. *El Valley Centro* ran from December 1–31, 2005, *Los* from January 1–31, 2006, and *Sogobi* from February 1–28, 2006.

SKY (2005)
video/DVD, 1 screen
Vancouver International Film Festival, Vancouver
The 6th sky of *TEN SKIES* was looped and projected in a gallery with speakers. The installation was shown from Sept 29–Oct 14, 2005.

Selected Screenings & Exhibitions

1973
Film Forum, New York, USA
1974
Cannes International Film Festival, Cannes, France
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
1975
New Directors/New Films, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, USA
Ann Arbor Film Festival, Ann Arbor, USA
Chicago International Film Festival, Chicago, USA
1976
Cineprobe, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
Athens Film Festival, Athens, USA
1977
Documenta 6, Kassel, West Germany
7th Int. Forum des Jungen Films, Berlin, West Germany
6th International Film Festival, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
New Directors/New Films, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
21st London Film Festival, London, England
Edinburgh International Film Festival, Edinburgh, Scotland
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, USA
1978
Artpark, Lewiston, USA
Filmex, Los Angeles, USA
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
Center for Experimental Art, Toronto, Canada
Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, USA
Edinburgh International Film Festival, Edinburgh, Scotland
Clocktower, New York, USA
1979
Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA
San Diego International Film Festival, San Diego, USA
Le Cinéma Parallel, Montréal, Canada
1980
10th Int. Forum des Jungen Films, Berlin, West Germany
Edinburgh International Film Festival, Edinburgh, Scotland
Cineprobe, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
Winter Olympics, Lake Placid, USA
1981
Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
American Center, Paris, France
Festival Il Gergo Inquieto, Genova, Italy
Melbourne Film Festival, Melbourne, Australia
1982
Film Forum, New York, USA
Film Culture Center, Hong Kong
National Film Theatre, London, England
Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, USA
Academy Foundation, Beverly Hills, USA
Albright-Knox Museum, Buffalo, USA
Boston Film/Video Foundation, Boston, USA
1983
Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
Tate Gallery, London, England
Input '83, Liege, Belgium
Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, USA
Honolulu Academy of Art, Honolulu, USA
Zone Cinema, Hamilton, Canada
1984
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, USA
Film Forum, New York, USA
Institute of North American Studies, Barcelona, Spain
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France
Chicago Filmmakers, Chicago, USA
1985
The Kitchen, New York, USA
Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland
Cinémathèque Française, Paris, France
Boston Museum School, Boston, USA
1986
Retrospective, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada
Millennium, New York, USA
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA
Melbourne Film Festival, Melbourne, Australia

1987
Festival of Festivals, Toronto, Canada
17th Int. Forum des Jungen Films, Berlin, West Germany
Edinburgh International Film Festival, Edinburgh, Scotland
Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
16th Festival du Nouveau Cinéma, Montréal, Canada
Image Forum, Tokyo, Japan
1988
Flanders International Film Festival, Ghent, Belgium
Centro Insular Culture, Canary Islands
Deutsches Museum, Frankfurt, West Germany
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain
1989
Film Forum, New York, USA
Austin Film Society, Austin, USA
Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, USA
1990
Pleasure Dome, Toronto, Canada
Colgate University, Hamilton, USA
Collective for Living Cinema, New York, USA
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, USA
1991
School of the Art Institute, Chicago, USA
Wright State University, Dayton, USA
Ohio University, Athens, USA
1992
Pittsburgh Filmmakers, Pittsburgh, USA
Film Forum, Los Angeles, USA
Chicago Filmmakers, Chicago, USA
Northwest Film Center, Seattle, USA
Cinematheque, San Francisco, USA
1993
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA
Cineprobe, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
Millennium, New York, USA
1994
Scratching the Belly of the Beast, Film Forum, Los Angeles, USA
Saumarkt-Theater, Feldkirch, Austria
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada
Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver, Canada
1995
Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, USA
Saskatchewan Filmpool, Saskatchewan, Canada
Cinematheque Ontario, Toronto, Canada
University of California, Santa Barbara, USA
Center for the Arts, San Francisco, USA
1996
Sundance Film Festival, Park City, USA
25th International Film Festival, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
42nd Robert Flaherty Seminar, Aurora, USA
Viennale. Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria
Virginia Film Festival, Charlottesville, USA
Cineprobe, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
1997
Viewpoint, Ghent, Belgium
Cinematheque Ontario, Toronto, Canada
Queens University, Kingston, Canada
Concordia University, Montreal, Canada
Athens International Film Festival, Athens, USA
School of the Art Institute, Chicago, USA
1998
Retrospective, Pasadena Art Center, Pasadena, California
28th Int. Forum des Jungen Films, Berlin, Germany
Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, USA
Hallwalls, Buffalo, USA
Cornell Cinema, Ithaca, USA
Viennale. Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria
Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, USA
1999
Retrospective, Anthology Film Archives, New York
28th International Film Festival, Rotterdam, Holland
Austin Film Society, Austin, USA
Viennale. Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria
2000
Retrospective, Stadtkino/sixpackfilm, Vienna, Austria
30th Int. Forum des Jungen Films, Berlin, Germany
Sundance Film Festival, Park City, USA
44th London Film Festival, London, England
Viennale. Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria

2001
Cinematheque Busan, Busan, Korea
Los Angeles Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA
45th London Film Festival, London, England
Image Forum, Tokyo, Japan
Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, USA
Viennale. Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria
2002
American Tableaux (Traveling Exhibit), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA
32nd Int. Forum des Jungen Films, Berlin, Germany
Viennale. Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria
46th London Film Festival, London, England
Cornell Cinema, Ithaca, USA
Center for Land Use Interpretation, Los Angeles, USA
Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge, USA
Arizona International Film Festival, Tucson, USA
2003
22nd Vancouver International Film Festival, Vancouver, Canada
Ann Arbor Film Festival, Ann Arbor, USA
maths in motion, Künstlerhaus, Vienna, Austria
Portland Art Museum, Portland, USA
University of Chicago, Chicago, USA
Viennale. Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria
2004
Buenos Aires 6th Festival International de Cine, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Wisconsin Film Festival, Madison, USA
Tate Modern, London, England
13th Brisbane International Film Festival, Brisbane, Australia
Viennale. Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria
moving landscapes, Austrian Film Museum, Vienna, Austria
Filmmuseum München, Munich, Germany
34th Int. Forum des Jungen Films, Berlin, Germany
2005
Retrospective, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, England
Retrospective, argosfestival, Brussels, Belgium
New Horizons Film Festival, Cieszyn, Poland
Tribeca Film Festival, New York, USA
49th London Film Festival, London, England
Vancouver International Film Festival, Vancouver, Canada
34th International Film Festival, Rotterdam, Holland
35th Int. Forum des Jungen Films, Berlin, Germany
14th Brisbane International Film Festival, Brisbane, Australia
2006
Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France
Mar del Plata International Film Festival, Mar del Plata, Argentina
Hong Kong International Film Festival, Hong Kong, China
36th Int. Forum des Jungen Films, Berlin, Germany
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, USA
Hirshhorn Museum at the Smithsonian, Washington, D.C., USA
7th Jeonju International Film Festival, Jeonju, Korea
Viennale. Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria
50th London Film Festival, London, England
2007
Complete retrospective, Austrian Film Museum, Vienna, Austria
Documenta 12, Kassel, Germany
Vancouver International Film Festival, Vancouver, Canada
Film Comment Selects, New York, USA
Anthology Film Archives, New York, USA
36th International Film Festival, Rotterdam, Holland
4th Festival Internacional de Cine Contemporaneo, Mexico City, Mexico
Viennale. Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria
51st London Film Festival, London, England

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LUX, London, UK, www.lux.org.uk

Selected Bibliography

Films about James Benning

James Benning. Circling the Image
Germany 2003, Digi-Beta, 84 min, color, sound
DIRECTOR: Reinhard Wulf
CAMERA: Jürgen Behrens
SOUND: Günter Kunze
EDITING: Susanne Schweinheim
COMMISSIONING EDITOR: Werner Dütsch
PRODUCED BY: WDR—Westdeutscher Rundfunk
WORLD SALES: german united distributors, www.germanunited.com
QUERIES: reinhard.wulf@wdr.de

Reinhard Wulf's *Circling the Image* is an insightful documentary on James Benning's film practice. Wulf accompanied the artist for a week in November 2002, while Benning was scouting locations in California, Arizona, and Utah and shooting some footage for *13 LAKES*. Wulf accurately observes Benning's solitary, self-sufficient way of filmmaking and his relationship to the landscape. Avoiding all commentary he lets Benning speak for himself. Benning "explains in great detail his working methods, his ambivalent relationship towards the United States and his ideas about his role as an artist and filmmaker." (WDR, information leaflet, 2003)

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